



# Boundaries of the Text

**EPIC PERFORMANCES IN SOUTH AND  
SOUTHEAST ASIA**

Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger and  
Laurie Sears, Editors

**UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN CENTER FOR  
SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES**

**The University of Michigan  
Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies**

**MICHIGAN PAPERS ON SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA**

Ann Arbor, Michigan



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Edited by

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Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asia  
Number 35

*Open access edition funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities/  
Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Humanities Open Book Program.*

Library of Congress catalog card number: 90-85739

ISBN: 0-89148-062-5 (cloth)

ISBN: 0-89148-063-3 (paper)

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Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies  
The University of Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-0-89148-062-4 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-0-89148-063-1 (paper)

ISBN 978-0-472-12775-7 (ebook)

ISBN 978-0-472-90171-5 (open access)

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## NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

The editors have chosen not to italicize the terms *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in order to emphasize that they are flexible traditions rather than simply printed texts. The names of printed texts are italicized. Regional performance genres of these traditions are italicized as non-English words, but not capitalized unless they contain the name of an epic character.

In the essays on South Asian epic traditions, the names of the epics and their characters are spelled in English, approximating their pronunciation without diacritical marks (thus, *Lakshmana*, rather than *Lakṣmaṇa*). For consistency among essays, the two essays discussing Hindi traditions spell the names of the epics and characters according to their pan-Indian forms (*Ramayana* rather than *Ramayan*; *Rama* rather than *Ram*).

Following Indonesian and Malaysian governmental practice, diacritical marks are not used for Malay, Indonesian, and Javanese italicized words.





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## INTRODUCTION

Laurie J. Sears and Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger

Audiences can witness performances of the Mahabharata and Ramayana in South and Southeast Asia in an array of styles that range from two-hour recitations by a single performer and informal women's singing groups to all-night shadow puppet plays and professional theatrical productions performed for thirty consecutive nights. Performances of the epics in these regions often celebrate ritual passages: births, deaths, marriages, and religious observances. Although written versions of the Mahabharata and Ramayana have existed in both South and Southeast Asia for hundreds of years, the texts were rarely intended to be read privately. The stories live and are transmitted through performance; their characters are well known and well loved.

This volume examines several performance traditions of the Mahabharata and Ramayana in South and Southeast Asia and, more specifically, the relationship between these performances and the written texts that record the epic traditions.<sup>1</sup> Further, the contributors are interested in *indigenous* conceptions of the relationships between oral performance and written text. What do performers and audiences mean when they identify something as "Ramayana" or "Mahabharata?" How do they conceive of texts? What are the boundaries of the texts? We use the term "text" in its broadest sense, as "marked words," making possible texts which exist in both written and oral

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1. This volume grew out of a double panel presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies held in Chicago in 1986, entitled "Oral Performance and Written Text: The Epics in South and Southeast Asia." We would like to thank the chair of the panel, Barbara Stoler Miller (Columbia University), and panel discussants Benedict Anderson (Cornell University) and Susan S. Wadley (Syracuse University) for their comments and participation.

forms.<sup>2</sup> The indigenous terminology for some of the traditions examined in this volume may not distinguish between performed and written versions, although the performers have specific ideas about what performance “does” to the written text. Other traditions maintain more rigid, marked boundaries between performed and written genres.

Given the common associations between performance and orality and between written texts and literacy, the examination of the interaction between text and performance has been overshadowed by the broader scholarly discourse on orality and literacy.<sup>3</sup> Before Milman Parry and Albert Lord’s work on Yugoslav oral epic was published in 1960, European epic traditions were most often associated with written literature rather than oral performance because the performance traditions of many of the European epics had been lost (cf. Bakhtin 1981, 3–40). Influenced by the concerns of traditional philology, European scholars in the colonial period were likewise most interested in the written Ramayana and Mahabharata traditions of South and Southeast Asia. When Dutch scholars in Java encountered the performance tradition of the Javanese shadow theater in the latter part of the nineteenth century, for example, they tried to reconstruct the “pure” Indic tradition that they believed had been “corrupted” by the village puppeteers over the centuries (cf. Rassers [1931] 1959, 111; Serrurier 1896, 28–31). The Dutch scholars discounted the ability of the Javanese puppeteers to manipulate old and new materials in performance, seeking instead to establish “correct” versions of well-known stories. Several epic repertoires are only now receiving attention from scholars who focus on the performance traditions in addition to the written texts.<sup>4</sup>

The dynamics of the interaction between written texts and performance are of particular interest in South and Southeast Asia where oral performance and written traditions share a long and interwoven history. Their continuing interactions challenge early studies of orality and literacy which assumed a clear distinction between the two. Lord’s study of Yugoslav and Homeric epics ([1960] 1976) is an example of this assumption. Building on the foundations laid by Parry, Lord

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2. Western scholarship has in modern times associated the word “text” with written words. However, as Walter Ong (1982, 13) points out, its root meaning, “to weave,” is compatible with oral utterance. Dennis Tedlock (1983, 233) speaks of an oral “text” as a “way of fixing *words* without making visible marks.”

3. Of course, the development of this discourse is not recent. Edmund Leach (1988, 22) notes that Vico in the early eighteenth century and L. H. Morgan in the late nineteenth century had noticed the effects of writing on civilization.

4. See, for example, Becker 1979; Blackburn and Ramanujan 1986; Blackburn and Flueckiger 1989; Sweeney 1972, 1973, 1980, 1987; and Zurbuchen 1987.

pointed to certain textual characteristics, including formula and theme, that identify a particular text as having been composed orally. This schema does not account for certain complex situations in which texts have been written for oral performance and, therefore, may include many of the features that Lord identifies with oral composition (cf. Finnegan 1976).

More recently, the emphasis in orality/literacy studies has been on the continuum between oral and written language rather than on their dichotomy. Walter Ong (1982, 26), for example, identifies written texts that display Lord's oral features as representing one step along the way from orality to literacy, before the oral mind has fully "interiorized" writing. More generally, the work of Ong and other scholars concerns itself with the power of writing and literacy to gradually, but radically, restructure consciousness and alter thought processes and styles of communication.<sup>5</sup> While they acknowledge that literacy does not replace orality and that the transition to literacy does not always follow the same patterns, there remains an underlying assumption of a unidirectional movement from orality to literacy.

In their analyses of oral and written language and discourse, contributors to Deborah Tannen (1982, 1984) describe a more complex picture in which they find both differences and similarities between spoken and written language. Tannen (1982) herself argues for a continuum between oral and literate communicative strategies. She associates strategies of oral communication with those situations which emphasize interpersonal involvement between speaker/writer and audience and literate strategies with situations which focus on content. She further suggests that, depending on the context, the same people may use devices associated with both traditions.<sup>6</sup> In the same volume, Shirley Heath (1982) argues that the interplay between oral and written language is ever changing and dependent upon the different meanings that individuals and societies give to literacy.

Another way of analyzing the differences between oral and written language has been the performance-centered approach, popularized by Dell Hymes's "ethnography of speaking" (1964, 1974) and elaborated

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5. See Ong 1977, 1982; Goody and Watt 1968; Goody 1977; and Havelock 1963, 1976, 1986.

6. Amin Sweeney notes that, "So much of what is being written about the differences between 'oral' and 'written' language concerns the speech and writing of literates, and a large part of this is in English" (personal communication, 1988). In Deborah Tannen (1982), however, contributing authors rely on research conducted among Africans, Javanese, Karok Indians, Chinese, and Japanese, some of whom are not literate.

by such scholars as Richard Bauman (1977, 1986) and Dennis Tedlock (1977, 1983). This ethnographic approach includes the study of text consumption as well as production; the focus is on the broad context that surrounds the performance of a text. The written text thus becomes only one of many factors which contribute to and interact with the oral performance, softening the sharpness of the earlier dichotomy.

Current scholarly debate continues to generate alternatives to the oral/written dichotomy as applied to literature and performance traditions. One alternative to the oral/written dichotomy is suggested by Ron Scollon and Suzanne Scollon, who distinguish between focused and nonfocused interaction in Northern Athabaskan oral traditions. Focused interaction takes place in communication situations where there are "strong limitations on negotiation between participants," while nonfocused interaction takes place where the "highest value is on mutual sense making among the participants" (1984, 183). Wendy Doniger (this volume) suggests a terminology of "fluid" and "fixed" texts, referring to more and less stable versions of both written and oral texts. V. Narayana Rao has made the further distinction in South Asian literatures between "recorded" and "received" texts, that is, between that which has been written down or recited and that which an audience or consumer of the text hears or *thinks* has been recorded.<sup>7</sup> Although the received text may be very different from the initial recorded text, it is often this received text which is retransmitted through performance and/or recorded text.

Turning to Southeast Asia, Amin Sweeney (1973, 1980, 1987) has drawn attention to oppositions he finds in Malay tradition: the distinction between aural and visual consumption and that between "stylized" and "nonstylized" composition, where "stylized" composition may be either oral or written. Sweeney, however, argues against the notion that these are alternatives to the oral/written dichotomy; he suggests, rather, that these new oppositions throw light on various aspects of oral and written composition.

The essays in this volume add a needed dimension of complexity to the study of oral and literate cultures by their specific focus on the relationship between performance and text in particular epic traditions. The essays illustrate the difficulty of maintaining sharp distinctions between oral and written patterns, and the traditions under consideration defy a unidirectional movement from oral to written.<sup>8</sup> Moreover,

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7. Rao, Seminar on the Ramayana, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1986.

8. Jan Vansina (1985, 148) posits a difference between the flow of information that exists in memory and the flow of information that exists in written documents.

rather than focusing on dichotomies or continua, the authors of these essays present a diversity of genres that illustrate several levels of interaction between written texts and oral performances. Written texts may serve as the basis for the verbal content of performance or their actual content may be less well known, in which case the written texts may provide a frame for the performance and/or help to identify textual communities.<sup>9</sup>

The contributors to this volume present various indigenous conceptions of text and performance, their boundaries, and their interaction. These indigenous categories force us to question the boundaries between oral and written genres, boundaries which may not coincide with indigenous genre distinctions. In these Asian societies, classifications such as "Ramayana," "Mahabharata," or some other indigenous category frequently cut across Western generic divisions between tale, song, and epic, between history and myth, or between oral and written traditions (see Sweeney, this volume; Blackburn and Flueckiger 1989).

Thus, while Western scholars have seen similarities between Indic Ramayana and Mahabharata tales and European epic traditions (Winstedt [1907] 1923; Dumézil 1968; Van Buitenen 1973), in South and Southeast Asia the traditions often defy Western divisions between myth and history. In India, for example, Mahabharata tales were classified as *itihāsa* ("thus it occurred"), the Sanskrit word for story or history. Ramayana tales were often known as *caritra*, a Sanskrit word for adventures, exploits, or deeds (Monier-Williams [1899] 1976, 389). The Sanskrit word *caritra* also took root in Indonesia and Malaysia, and many cycles of stories are called by local variants of the term to this day (Jav., *crita*; Malay, *ceritera*). Sweeney (this volume) argues against classifying Malay Ramayana traditions as epic at all, preferring to use these indigenous terminologies.<sup>10</sup>

Performers in central India often identify both Ramayana performances and written texts as simply "Ramayana," rather than dividing

However, he maintains that the only consistent difference between written and oral utterances is that repetition occurs more frequently in the latter (1985, 69).

9. We define textual community as a group of people who share knowledge of the same oral or written textual tradition. See Benedict Anderson (1983) for a penetrating discussion of other types of "imagined" communities.

10. In this context, it is important to note that while the oral and written traditions of the Mahabharata and Ramayana began to take shape in written form in South Asia about two thousand years ago, the oral sources for these texts stretch back into an unknown antiquity. In Southeast Asia, characters from these story cycles began to be mentioned in inscriptions from eastern Borneo dating back to the fifth century A.D. (Chhabra 1965, 88-91). In Java, written poetic forms of the Ramayana and Mahabharata stories date from the late eighth century (Sears 1984).



them into separate generic categories. Similarly, in central Java, both orally performed and written-out plays are called *lakon*, fixed oral and written texts are called *pakem*, sung oral and written poetry is called *macapat*, and oral and written stories are called *crita*. Listening for indigenous terminology enables scholars to look for and create alternative analytic models and methodologies which are more relevant to the traditions under consideration than those based on Western literary categories.

The essays in this book are concerned with three types of Ramayana and Mahabharata traditions that often blend, overlap, and interact: the oral tradition that exists beyond the domain of performance, the performance tradition, and the written textual tradition.<sup>11</sup> The oral tradition includes reportable information about the epics—summaries of stories and related cultural data as well as hagiographies of authors/composers—that may be passed down from parent to child and from performer to apprentice. It is a method of transmission in which the content of the message is paramount and for whose presentation style the speaker assumes no responsibility. We define “performance” as the verbal, *artistic* enactment of oral or written traditions, as well as a method of transmission (Bauman 1977, 3).<sup>12</sup> This distinction between oral and performance traditions coincides with that which Dell Hymes (1975, 18) draws between someone knowing *about* a tradition and being able and willing to perform it in front of an audience, even if the audience is made up of the gods alone (see Blackburn, this volume). Our consideration of the written tradition looks at how stories take shape and are transmitted through written media, whether palm leaf, woodblock, or printed text.

For many Indians and Southeast Asians, the knowledge that the tradition exists in a written form may enhance the status of the tradition without tangibly changing it. While the written texts connected to these tales have frequently been valued as heirlooms or objects of religious devotion—what Doniger (this volume) calls the “outside” of the text—increasing literacy and expanding access to modern education have brought changes in the ways in which these texts are used. The essays in this volume document the accommodation of South and South-

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11. See Laurie J. Sears (forthcoming) for an elaboration of these distinctions and Edward Bruner (1984), who distinguishes only between narrative and performance traditions.

12. This definition of performance is consistent with that of many folklorists, but narrower than that employed by linguists who consider any verbal statement a “performance.” See Dell Hymes (1971) for an early discussion of this difference in terminology.

east Asian performance traditions to the increasing importance and number of written texts.

The studies presented here show both similarities and differences in the ways in which texts and performances interact in South and Southeast Asia. In this way, these essays have opened up a dialogue between scholars of South and Southeast Asia and encouraged comparative studies of these regions. The first two essays introduce the reader to a wide range of issues confronting scholars of South and Southeast Asian epic traditions. Amin Sweeney discusses the imposition of Western literary genres—applicable to both oral and written texts—on Malay traditions and those who study or perform them. He argues that the creation of epic as a genre in present-day Malaysia was the result of the imposition of Western categories by British colonial scholars. Sweeney concludes that only by studying the interaction between oral and written traditions in the Malay world can one begin to understand the workings of either. In the second essay, Wendy Doniger focuses on the interaction between written and oral traditions in India, showing the need to let go of previously held associations between written and fixed or oral and fluid texts. In this context, she describes the impermanence and variability (sometimes due to the whims and inaccuracies of the copyist) of many written forms of the epic and the surprising consistency or fixity of certain oral traditions.

The next two essays, based on research data collected in India and Indonesia, respectively, support the argument for analyzing oral performance and written traditions in terms of their mutual relationship. Both Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger and Laurie J. Sears present definitions of written and performance traditions in the words of their informants rather than those derived from Western conceptual schemes. Flueckiger discusses Ramayana performance traditions of nonliterate and literate women in central India that have traditionally been overlooked by both Western and Indian scholars. She presents these performances as “literacy events” (a term coined by Heath 1982) in which the knowledge that the written text exists is central to the event, while the text is not necessarily read at all. She shows how modern education is increasingly influencing the oral performance of the Ramayana text under consideration, the *Rāmcaritmānas* of the sixteenth-century Hindi poet Tulsidas. Flueckiger concludes that increasing literacy is redefining the boundaries of this text in more rigid and standardized ways.

Sears finds similar patterns in the relationships between the epic performance tradition of Javanese shadow plays and the texts traditionally associated with these performances. She argues that certain

written texts have specified roles within the oral tradition of the Javanese shadow theater, even if the majority of the puppeteers have never seen these texts. The knowledge that a written text exists enriches the oral performance tradition but does not limit it in any way. Sears identifies modern education rather than literacy *per se* as a major factor influencing the contemporary performance tradition. She ends her essay by isolating two contemporary performance styles which paradoxically signal both a narrowing of the textual boundaries in newer written traditions and a loosening of those in the oral tradition.

Whereas many studies of text and performance have examined the effects of written texts on performance, the next two essays discuss how performance both comments on and alters a written text. Philip Lutgendorf focuses on the extravagant Indian *Rāmīlā* performances, held annually in Banaras, as performative exegesis of the written text, again Tulsidas's *Rāmcaritmānas*. He finds that performers and connoisseurs of the performance tradition often refer to the *Rāmīlā* as *ṭīkā* (commentary). They see the performance as more than a simple enactment of the written text; it is an elaboration of the text. If traditional oral exegesis (*kathā*) expands on the text, Lutgendorf argues that the *Rāmīlā* pushes that expansion to the limit, blurring spatial and temporal boundaries that distinguish performance from real life.

Using an analytical technique inspired by Erving Goffman's (1974) "frame theory," Stuart Blackburn's study of the south Indian shadow puppet tradition of Kerala also differentiates between written and performed text. While this Ramayana tradition verbally follows the classical text of the medieval Tamil poet Kampan very closely, Blackburn shows how it adapts and changes that written text through five performative levels, or frames. The performative adaptation is an interpretive device which frames and reorients the Kampan text without substituting for it. Blackburn finds that the ritual nature of this performance tradition results in stable rather than fluctuating boundaries in the written text of this Kerala Ramayana tradition.

Returning to Southeast Asia, the last two essays discuss Balinese and Malay traditions. Mary Zurbuchen examines three Balinese dramatic genres, analyzing the ways in which each genre intersects with the textual epic forms. Although Bali is perhaps that part of Southeast Asia where performance traditions are most closely tied to written texts, Zurbuchen suggests that these patterns of verbal art are being altered by both linguistic change and the introduction of modern communications media. Her essay highlights contradictions in contemporary performance traditions; for example, a performance style can be

divorced from the classical written traditions and yet still be dependent on written texts or playscripts.

If Balinese traditions are those most closely tied to classical texts in Southeast Asia, Malay traditions may be the least so. In the last essay, Amin Sweeney analyzes the narrowing boundaries of the enclave of the oral specialist in Malay society. He describes how writing has continued to displace the oral specialist by taking over the presentation and transmission of contrived speech. Sweeney groups together stylized written and oral materials, showing how Western literary genres have been imposed on both these domains. He maintains that the comparison of written and oral versions of these tales will tell us little unless it is situated within Malay discourse as a whole. His discussion crosses modern national boundaries to draw together texts and traditions from other Malay societies now part of Indonesia. Sweeney concludes that modern electronic media is having a greater effect on performance traditions than has mass literacy.

The authors of these essays find several similarities in the presentation of the respective performance traditions they examine. One important continuity is the fact that performers contextualize or localize their texts and characters in order to make them more accessible to their audiences. In the women's traditions discussed by Flueckiger, the stories are localized through a feminization of the text. Sears identifies the creation of branch stories by Javanese puppeteers as an important means through which the epics are contextualized for Javanese audiences. In the *Rāmīlā* tradition discussed by Lutgendorf, this is done through visual commentary; Blackburn sees this process reflected in the humanizing of the poet Kampan through local tales. In Zurbuchen's study of the Balinese *sendratari* (dance-drama) tradition, the shift from archaic Old Javanese to modern Balinese in the speech of the noble characters has made the tradition more accessible to contemporary audiences. Although Sweeney (1972) contains a lengthy discussion of the localization of knowledge, in this volume he notes the declining number of Malay shadow puppet performances and the puppeteers' weakening command of the performance tradition, as the domain in which these performances are meaningful continues to narrow.

Although the essays posit possible differences between South and Southeast Asian notions of text and performance, it is difficult to isolate different patterns of interaction between written and oral language in South and Southeast Asia. In India written texts of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata may be held as accurately in oral memory as in written form. Although certain performers may not be able to read the

written texts of Valmiki or Tulsidas, they may become intimately familiar with these texts through the workings of the oral tradition.<sup>13</sup> In some areas of Southeast Asia, there is a looser connection between written Ramayana and Mahabharata texts and performances of these stories. The respect given to these texts within the oral tradition is more readily apparent than familiarity with the written texts themselves.<sup>14</sup>

One reason for the differences in South and Southeast Asian attitudes towards the epics and their textual boundaries may be found in their status as religious and ritual texts. In India the epics have remained religious traditions that continue to be important in the practice of modern Hinduism, whereas in many parts of Southeast Asia the epic stories have become increasingly divorced from the religious traditions that nurtured them in the past. For example, in dramatic *Rāmīlā* performances in central India, infertile women from the audience directly participate in the enacted sacrifice made by King Dasharatha for progeny—in hopes of themselves becoming fertile. In the Tamil puppet theater performances of the Ramayana in south India (Blackburn, this volume), every performance ends with the death of Ravana, as an auspicious sign of the ultimate victory of good over evil. In contrast, in Islamic Malaysia and Indonesia—excluding Hindu Bali—these texts have a primarily social rather than religious importance. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that certain episodes as performed in Southeast Asia are still considered to carry a mystical potency. For example, in Malaysia the episode portraying the death of Ravana, although regularly performed, requires certain rituals so that the portrayal of the death will not cause problems from the spirits.<sup>15</sup> The same episode is rarely performed in Java, where the enactment of the fall of a great king might suggest the passing of the legitimacy of the government in power. In India *bhakti* (devotionalism) has tended to protect the “deep structure” of the epic traditions, whereas increasingly secular Malay and Indonesian epic traditions are beginning to recast the epic heroes and stories in irreverent new ways.

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13. V. Narayana Rao (personal communication, 1987) has spoken of an “oral literacy” when referring to a similar phenomenon in which “nonliterate” performers or scholars are intimately aware of the phonological and prosodic systems of the language and tradition.

14. There are, however, stylized Southeast Asian poetic traditions such as *macapat* (not discussed in this volume) where sung poetic Ramayana and Mahabharata texts are retained in memory and closely approximate written versions of these texts (cf. Kartomi 1973).

15. Amin Sweeney (personal communication, 1988).

The dissociation of the Southeast Asian epics from religious meanings is one of the few consistent distinctions we find between South and Southeast Asian Ramayana and Mahabharata traditions. Although scholars of Southeast Asia may find it difficult to imagine a sacred comic book, South Asianists argue that comic book versions of the Ramayana and Mahabharata are, indeed, popular and sacred in India. It is the strength of the ritual tradition associated with these epic texts in South Asia that saves them from the increasing secularization such texts are experiencing in Southeast Asia.

Perhaps this secularization accounts for Benedict Anderson's observation that Ramayana and Mahabharata texts do not represent the nation in Indonesia and Malaysia as they still can and do in India.<sup>16</sup> In fact, the Islamic and Christian inhabitants of the outer Indonesian islands may only become acquainted with these epic heroes when they read about them in modern textbooks. Moreover, Ramayana and Mahabharata performances have been used for pointed political commentary. For example, during the period of Sukarno's Guided Democracy, the epic heroes in Java were used to promulgate a particularly Marxist dialogue. Perhaps the disassociation of the Southeast Asian epic texts from formal religion will likewise encourage the loosening of these texts from their ritual boundaries, as is suggested in the essays in this volume on Malaysia, Java, and Bali.

By analyzing specific performance traditions, these essays examine the broader questions of what happens to written texts when they are performed, and what happens to performance traditions when they interact with written texts. Textual boundaries often become blurred when we consider the oral performance of traditions that may have been preserved and transmitted through both written and oral channels. One result of the scholarly dialogue generated by this collection has been to reveal the complexity of the distinctions and interactions between oral and written patterns in South and Southeast Asia. The lack of consistent differences between South and Southeast Asian textual interactions suggested by these essays supports our contention that these textual boundaries are difficult to maintain. Perhaps now more than ever, these boundaries are in a state of flux, contracting or expanding as these societies respond to increasing access to modern education, print technology, and electronic media.

The intricate connections between Ramayana and Mahabharata texts and performances in South and Southeast Asia are a small but

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16. Benedict Anderson (discussant commentary at the Association for Asian Studies panels from which this volume emerged, 1986).

significant part of a larger theoretical discourse on issues of orality and literacy that cuts across region and discipline. This approach has opened up dialogue between scholars of South and Southeast Asia and has been useful for the study of textual boundaries in these societies. However, scholars need to explore further, in other regions of the world, indigenous conceptions of performance and text in a wide array of genres.

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## LITERACY AND THE EPIC IN THE MALAY WORLD

Amin Sweeney

It may well be argued that colonial print literacy created “the epics” in Malay, and that, in so doing, it effectively guaranteed their demise. While this seems to me to be a tolerably solid conceit, in a collection of papers which sets out to assess the effects of literacy on the epics in South and Southeast Asia, it may appear that my aim is to bring our deliberations to a swift conclusion. However, my now evident need to extricate myself from a potentially nasty situation should indicate that this is not my purpose.

In Malay tradition there are a number of tales, both written and oral and deriving from various genres of performance, which we may perceive to be versions of the Ramayana and Mahabharata: the “epics,” according to the terms of the panel upon which my contributions to this volume are based. My reluctance to employ the term “epic” in order to single out the Ramayana and Mahabharata does not arise from any wish to avoid the use of Western terms: such a stance would make it impossible to write this paper. Rather, my concern stems from the fact that this use of “epic” necessitates arbitrarily carving out from the range of Malay discourse an area perceived to parallel a universalized Western category even though Malay tradition made no such delineation. Such imposing of external categories precludes an understanding of the workings of Malay tradition on its own terms. In these introductory remarks, therefore, I shall address the ways of differentiating knowledge obtained in preprint Malay society and examine what we may term “epic purpose.”

In a recent work (1987), I study the relationships between oral and written traditions in the Malay world.<sup>1</sup> The basic argument is that

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1. For a much more detailed discussion of many of the ideas presented here, see my *A Full Hearing: Orality and Literacy in the Malay World* (1987). My contributions

only by studying their interaction can one begin to understand the workings of either. While writing caused the displacement of large areas of oral tradition and transformed much of what survived, oral habits persisted in written composition throughout the age of manuscript culture, and even in this age of print and electronic media, many areas of Malay-speaking society still reveal a strongly oral orientation.

Prior to the introduction of print, Malay society was a radically oral manuscript culture. In earlier work (1980), I had become aware of the aural nature of traditional Malay literature: presentation and consumption were in many ways similar to a performance of stylized oral composition. Tales were presented in a rhythmical chant to an audience which did not expect to hear every word. The similarities explained the presence in written works of many features which are normally associated with oral performance and would be out of place in material intended to be experienced visually. While the palace scribe is no longer with us, it is still possible to observe the process of stylized oral composition. My research reveals that the teller depends upon the extensive use of formulas and patterns in every stage of his work.

The term "oral formulaic composition" now has a rather specialized sense, being associated with the theories of Milman Parry and Albert Lord. Lord's ([1960] 1976) concept of the "formula" concerns only one aspect of oral composition, which is of somewhat limited relevance to Malay composition. A broader framework was suggested by the ideas of E. H. Gombrich ([1960] 1969) concerning the psychology of pictorial art, which emphasizes the importance of the conceptual image or schema. The idea of the schema or minimum stereotype seemed particularly well suited to the study of Malay composition, oral and written. Thus, the concept of schematic composition may be seen to underlie the patterns produced in the morphological and formulaic analyses of Vladimir Propp (1968) and Lord ([1960] 1976), respectively, for the writer and teller of traditional Malay composition relied upon schemata at every level of their work, from building the plot to choosing the actual words used.<sup>2</sup> Lord's contention that the introduction of writing

to the present volume are based on a paper read at the meeting of the Association for Asian Studies in 1986. Although these essays appear in print well after *A Full Hearing*, I trust that my contributions may be of some use in the context of this comparative volume, a major purpose of which is to promote collaboration and dialogue between South and Southeast Asianists.

2. In speaking of "schemata," I am not identifying some objective category. I am merely perceiving that, in comparison with print literate standards in modern Malay and Indonesian (and in modern English) of what is normal, knowledge in Malay

will free the composer from the need of formulas and well-established themes ([1960] 1976, 131) assumes the creation of a reading public. Such formulas would still be essential for effective communication with a listening audience familiar only with an oral/aural tradition. Thus, a vital distinction to be made is not merely that between oral and written composition, but also between aural and visual consumption. Indeed, my examination revealed that the same "literary grammar" was used to generate both oral and written composition schematically, although both traditions developed their own conventions in accordance with the different media involved.

In my first attempts to study Malay storytelling, I realized that there was an important distinction to be made between "stylized" and "nonstylized" form. In view of the (then at least) prevailing notion promulgated by scholars such as R. O. Winstedt that the "rhapsodist's tales" were told in "shapeless" colloquial language, I had found it necessary to emphasize that, in the absence of writing, Malay storytelling was not limited to the language of everyday conversation, and that just as the language of literature is a stylized form of everyday speech regulated by various conventions, so, too, do we find that oral tradition has developed stylized forms of language and presentation (1973, 3). I had become particularly aware of this when studying the language of the Malay shadow play (*wayang Siam*), which is one of the more elaborate manifestations of stylized form still observable. By the use of various formulary features, such as *wayang* words, epithets, strings of synonyms, runs, the employing of "complicated constructions" created by contorting the morphology and syntax of everyday speech, mnemonic patterns, and various other devices, the performer (*dalang*) produces a heightened form of the local dialect, intelligible to the users of the vernacular but clearly set apart from it. It became clear that this phenomenon was by no means restricted to the shadow play. Other types of traditional drama, such as the *Mek Mulung* and *Mak Yong*, genres of storytelling such as *Awang Batil* and *Tarik Selampit*, and indeed various nonnarrative forms, as for example, in the fields of traditional medicine and spirit mediumship, were all found to employ similarly contrived modes of speech. This stylized language is further set off from the vernacular in that it does not employ the intonation of everyday speech: depending on the genre, it may be presented in the form of song, chant, or strongly rhythmical speech. Just as penman-

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tradition was preserved and presented in larger, more distinctively patterned, chunks than those to which we are accustomed.

ship was an exclusive art in Malay manuscript culture, so, too, in oral tradition, exponents of such manifestations of the stylized form are usually specialists and professionals.

It is undeniable that the features of the stylized form make possible rapid-fire composition in performance; they are necessary for communication with a nonliterate audience; and they provide the teller with a saleable commodity. Of most importance in an oral society, however, they are essential for the preservation and transmission of knowledge. A highly literate culture tends to assume that the natural way of communicating or recording the significant is via the medium of written style, and discourse will veer between the poles of casual, everyday conversation and formal literary style, depending on the context.<sup>3</sup> The illiterate in such a society is denied this possibility and is rightly seen as a deprived individual. In an oral society, however, if discourse were limited to the relatively ephemeral language of everyday conversation, that society would find it difficult to survive. However, the use of strong rhythms, mnemonic patterning, parallelism, and other formulaic devices makes it possible to encapsulate far larger chunks of knowledge for storage and recall than is possible in the vernacular. This "poetised speech," as Eric Havelock (1963) calls it in his study of Homeric Greece, was the only instrument available for preserving and transmitting cultural information and formed an "enclave" within the vernacular of an oral culture, providing it with its cultural memory. This "oral enclave of contrived speech . . . constituted a body of general education conserved and transmitted between the generations" (Havelock 1971, 41). In any culture, apart from the ephemeral converse of daily transaction, there is also an area of preserved, significant communication, which in a literate culture is the language of the book. While everyday speech may be seen as fundamental and the language of literature derived from it, "the idiom and content of . . . the preserved word set the formal limits within which the ephemeral word can be expressed," for it contains "the maximum sophistication" of which a given epoch or culture is capable and establishes the thought forms of that culture (Havelock 1963, 135). Similarly, in an oral

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3. "Highly literate" is often equated with "Western print literacy," a notion which should be treated with caution. The term is acceptable when used to refer to the possibilities of print literacy which have been realized. However, the Western scholar of a Third World society who takes the standards of his or her academic coterie as the norm is likely to have a very idealized notion of Western literacy. A closer look at the scholar's own society may reveal many of the oral tendencies he or she had previously associated with cultures only recently introduced to mass literacy.

culture, it is in the area of preserved, significant communication, framed in contrived, poetized speech that the maximum degree of sophistication is found, the state of mind revealed therein being the general or ruling state of mind (Havelock 1963, 135).

In a society newly acquainted with writing, the notion of the written word as a more "correct," "tidied up" version of the vernacular (i.e., according to colonial scholars such as Winstedt), or the assumption that all subjects of daily conversation may equally well be written about would be strange indeed. When writing begins to displace oral tradition, the first effects are upon the stylized enclave of significant, preserved communication. One of the most widely perceived advantages of writing is its capacity to preserve the spoken word, thereby relieving the mind of the burden of memorization, and it was in the area of contrived speech that this burden was greatest. Initially, moreover, it would have seemed pointless to preserve in writing that material which had not been considered worth preserving in the prewriting era, that is, speech not processed for storage in the stylized form. Thus, in the context of the Malay-speaking world, when we speak of the displacement of the oral tradition by writing and the dwindling role of the oral specialist, it becomes clear that we are particularly concerned with the shrinkage, transformation, or depreciation in importance of the enclave of contrived speech which was his domain.

It should be emphasized at this point that the erosion of this enclave is not necessarily an indication of a radical change in the general state of mind of a society. Thus, in the Malay world, while the role of the oral specialist became gradually more peripheral, the oral thought processes reflected in his principles of composition survived to varying degrees in written composition, much of which reveals the signs of schematic structure such as strongly distinctive motifemic patterning on the level of plot, character typing, themes and topoi, parataxis, repetition, copiousness, parallelisms, formulas, and formulaic expression. Not only were such features necessary for effective communication with a nonliterate, listening audience, the new freedom from memorization offered by writing was but a relative one: in Malay manuscript culture, "visual retrieval" (to use Walter Ong's [1977] term) was still very rudimentary: pages were solidly packed with writing, unbroken by headings or paragraphing, and with little or no space between words—not to mention the absence of indexing—so that rapid retrieval of information was impossible. This made it imperative for the writer to continue to memorize much of his inventory of composing materials in



relatively large chunks; and, to ensure retention, such materials had to be typical, that is, schematic.<sup>4</sup>

While the study of the professional oral storyteller and his audience, or of the everyday discourse of nonliterate persons, will provide insights into the oral mental set, it will afford us but a hazy notion of what primary oral (or indeed preprint) Malay society was like. A primary oral society is one untouched by writing or print, where the communication, storage, and retrieval of knowledge are exclusively oral operations. In such a society, the storyteller is a central figure, for the verbal storage of cultural information tends in large part to take the form of narrative. The teller is thus no mere entertainer or literary artist; he is scholar, jurist, and custodian of the traditions of his society (Havelock 1963). When writing is introduced, it does not merely coexist with an unchanging oral tradition; it begins to displace various functions of that tradition. This process began in the Malay world at least as early as the seventh century A.D. The chirographically based societies resulting from the introduction of writing remained radically oral manuscript cultures for the next twelve-hundred-odd years. The centers of literacy were the rulers' courts, though even there penmanship was an exclusive art, being a task for scribes. Yet the importance of writing should not be underestimated: paradoxically, it was the radically oral orientation of Malay societies, in which literacy was not a prerequisite for experiencing the written word—presentation and consumption being respectively oral and aural—which enabled writing to perform so many functions of transmitting, storing, and retrieving information previously the exclusive domain of the oral specialist. Initially, of course, the teller would hold his own, but the fact that the dependence on oral memory was no longer absolute would result in a gradual erosion of (a) the areas of influence in which he once reigned supreme, and (b) his standing in those areas which he was allowed to share with the written tradition or those into which writing had made no inroads. We may note, furthermore, that while our perspective as observers from a certain point in this progression allows us to make this distinction, the erosion of his standing in (b) is, in actuality, part of the process of erosion of the area. The European sources from the end of the nineteenth century would seem to indicate that the areas of influence left to (or shared with) the teller by the written tradition even before the introduction of print

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4: Another factor was the degree of ambiguity possible in the Jawi spelling of traditional composition. The word intended by a writer could often be ascertained only when in its context, and for this it was essential that the context be familiar, indeed predictable, to the audience.

literacy were not much larger than today. Yet, although the oral specialist's domain of interest was already very limited by the turn of the century, it is clear that he still had a much larger clientele than at the present, and, most important, that clientele included the ruling class. For example, the Sultan of Kedah still had an official *penglipur lara* storyteller in 1899 (Skeat 1953, 126). Such royal patronage would obviously lend authority to the words of the storyteller and enhance their normative influence on society. As writing and later print took over more and more of the functions of storing, retrieving, and transmitting knowledge at the centers of power, the domain of the storyteller became gradually narrower and his role increasingly less important in society as a whole, so that by modern times he had become mainly a soother of cares in the rural areas, concerned chiefly with tales of *Antah Berantah* (Never-never Land). Today, he lingers on at the illiterate peripheries of society, revealing but mere vestiges of his former role.

In considering the areas of influence once the domain of oral tradition, it seems safe to say that in some of those areas, writing, initially at least, merely appropriated certain functions of the teller and continued to perform them in the traditional manner, which is to say in a manner still reflecting the workings of the oral tradition as we know them. One example would appear to be genealogies of the ruling class.<sup>5</sup> The genealogy is one of the limited ways in which oral man—and woman!—is able to organize his or her experience into discrete units. As Jack Goody (1968, 32) has argued, the genealogy in a primary oral society requires constant adjustment in order to carry out its function as a “mnemonic of social relationships.” This “homeostatic tendency” or “structural amnesia” ensures that memories no longer relevant to present conditions are discarded, or, I would add, transformed, whether in form or function. Over the past two-and-a-half decades, I have observed this tendency in the orally transmitted genealogies of the Malay *dalang* (puppeteers) of the shadow play. Although those twenty-five-odd years have in some cases produced several “*dalang* generations,” the genealogies of the newest *dalangs* are rarely longer than those I collected in 1962. The most illustrious and most recent names are retained; others are discarded. My point is that writing appears to have had a far less drastic effect upon this homeo-

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5. In other areas once dominated by oral tradition, writing did not merely appropriate the function of the teller. As the possibilities of writing revealed themselves—often via the adoption of foreign models in which such possibilities had already been realized—some of these areas were radically transformed. Two examples were “religion” and “the law.”

static tendency in traditional Malay literature than might be expected. The transient nature of Malay manuscripts resulting from climatic conditions and the materials used, plus the orally oriented schematic methods of composition (which were indeed reinforced by that transience), continued to allow a large measure of "structural amnesia" usually associated only with oral tradition and enabled the scribe to adjust his texts to suit existing social conditions. What has been perceived by many modern scholars as inconsistency and the result of sloppiness was, in fact, a method of ensuring the relevance of works to contemporary needs. Even before the effects of mass education and the wide use of print had been felt, the sphere of interest represented in the written tradition by the state *silsilah* (genealogical chronicle) was no longer even shared by the storyteller. It was in the written *hikayat* that we find royal genealogies and traditions of the ruling class, not in the stylized oral performance of the *penglipur lara*.<sup>6</sup> Havelock describes the oral composition of the ancient Greek bard as "the sole<sup>7</sup> vehicle of important and significant communication. It therefore was called upon to memorialise and preserve the social apparatus, the governing mechanism, and the education for leadership and social management" (1963, 93-94). "It provided a massive repository of useful knowledge, a sort of encyclopedia of ethics, politics, history and technology" (1963, 27). To see large amounts of extraneous material and perceive it as incidental to the epic purpose and a drag on the narrative is to misunderstand that purpose, which was, in fact, didactic: "the tale is made subservient to the task of accommodating the weight of educational materials which lie within it" (1963, 61). This description will certainly not seem relevant to the role of the Malay storyteller today; one might, however, use Havelock's words to describe exactly the function of the *hikayat*, and, in particular, that of the *silsilah*.

The tendency of scholars to see the *silsilah* as a poor attempt to write "history" or as a mishmash of genres merely reveals their presupposition that traditional Malay literature possessed the same criteria for differentiating knowledge as the scholar. A *silsilah* contains not only royal genealogies and traditions and a recounting of past events; it may present such diverse material as an inventory of elephants (*Hikayat Aceh*), a description of palace building (*Sulalatu's-Salatin*), or lists of customs duties (*Silsilah Raja-raja Berunai*), often told at great length and all placed in the narrative framework as part of the tale. It is only our expectation that such topics will form the subject

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6. The *hikayat* is a written account, in prose. A *silsilah* is one type of *hikayat*.

7. But see my other essay in the present work.

matter of separate manuals that leads us to see them as somehow disparate. In traditional Malay society, the *silsilah* was the genre for treating such topics. The narrative is not an end in itself; in the still radically oral manuscript culture, narrative was the chief way to organize knowledge of all types.

In carving out the area of Malay discourse to be labelled "history," colonial scholars assumed the existence of a boundary between fictionality and referentiality similar to their own. The existence of the *silsilah* seemed to offer certain guidelines, although scholars were forced to conclude that the Malay historian was "wildly ignorant of the unities of place and time" (Winstedt 1958, 60). In fact, the areas regarded as history (i.e., what was believed to have happened) by the Malays might well have surprised the Western historian. Even today, to the Malay *dalang*, for example, the tales of Rama and Sita are as much "history" (*sejarah*) as, say, an account of the reign of Long Yunus of Kelantan, who died at the end of the eighteenth century, and the *dalang* can muster an impressive array of "evidence" in the local terrain to prove that the events related actually occurred.

Western culture was well aware that the delineation of genre results from the need to distinguish one form from others. That a genre owed its identity only to its position in a complex of relationships in a specific culture was not, however, always apparent: genres shared by the various Western cultures acquired a seemingly universal significance and validity. When Western scholars came to study Malay literature, therefore, they projected these "universal" categories onto their subject of study; and their study had a tremendous impact, as it determined the content of colonial education which was responsible for the spread of mass literacy. The result was that the Malays were presented with myth, saga, parable, fable, and epic. These distinctions did not correspond to any delineations made by Malays themselves; nor did Western scholars attempt to demonstrate the validity of such labels by applying formal criteria to their material. The Malays were thus forced to learn the features of such so-called genres by rote, even though they were often quite meaningless in the Malay context. Occasionally one heard a plaintive cry from Malay writers that these types are not easy to distinguish, but that, "Nevertheless, literary experts have divided them into [these] categories" (Edrus 1960, 84).

Thus, while generations of school children have been taught that the *Hikayat Seri Rama* and the *Hikayat Pandawa* are *epik*, in traditional Malay terms there are no criteria distinguishing them as such. They have been labelled "epics" only because colonial scholars perceived them to be versions of the Hindu "epics," the Ramayana and the Mahabha-

rata, which again they had already classified as epics on the basis of a perceived similarity with Greek epic. If, accepting for the sake of argument that the Ramayana and Mahabharata are epic poems, it be proposed that the *Hikayat Seri Rama* and *Hikayat Pandawa* deserve the appellation "epic" because they are translations of the Hindu epics, one must respond that they are neither translations, Hindu, nor poems. Thus, for example, the *Hikayat Seri Rama* in its extant form is a Muslim work. This is not merely a matter of vocabulary and script; the work is the product of a Muslim, aimed at a Muslim audience or one postulated to be receptive to Islam, that concerns the breaking of a contract mediated by the prophet Adam between a Muslim king, Rawana, and the Muslim God. The argument that the majority of the motifs originate from India is irrelevant and ignores the fact that traditional Malay composition is schematic. As with all material of foreign provenance, if there were to be effective communication with a Malay audience, such works had to be geared to the mental set of that audience. It is this requirement which accounts for the fact that so many Malay works originating from foreign sources are adaptations (*saduran*) rather than direct translations. In other words, they have been "reassembled" using the traditional "literary grammar" of the Malays.<sup>8</sup>

Elsewhere (1980), I have observed how Western colonial education defamiliarized traditional Malay literature for the Malays, and how the Malays have been taught to see their own literature from a Western viewpoint and to describe it using Western terms. It is in this sense that print literacy created the epics in Malay. While the process of defamiliarization may, in broader terms, be seen as one manifestation of what turned out to be an inevitable transition from radical orality to mass literacy, we should beware of assuming that literacy must everywhere follow inexorably one universal pattern of development. The adoption of "classical" Malay works for use in "vernacular" schools effectively reintroduced the Malays to their literature in a medium and social context very different from the traditional one. Literature had been an aural experience for most Malays, but now, although the same works were used, the experience was visual. Furthermore, the old palace literature now came to be associated in the minds of Malays with vernacular—which basically meant "peasant"—education and consequently suffered a severe loss of prestige. Also, the low opinion of traditional Malay literature held by many colonial scholars who judged everything by their own Western middle-class romanticist standards

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8. Lest it be thought that I espouse a linguistics of literature, I should note that my use of "grammar" is metaphorical!

eventually filtered down to the Malays, lowering further their estimation of that literature. It may even be argued that the "classical" Malay literature to which the Malays were thus reintroduced was in a sense the creation of the colonial authorities. The works selected by the British for use in vernacular schools were those which most accorded with their taste rather than with that of the Malays, and this was openly acknowledged (see Sweeney 1980, 7). In addition, the British actually initiated the creation of new works of "classical" Malay: oral tales were adapted into literary form, employing the style of palace literature, and published in the same textbook series as works of palace literature. Thus, for example, numskull tales—traditionally not considered worthy of literary treatment—were recomposed in palace Malay and bowdlerized to suit Victorian sensibilities. While this raised the status of such material by affording it the dignity of print, it did not improve the image of the classical Malay texts which rubbed shoulders with it in the same series.

In the context of a shift from manuscript to print culture, it may be said that with the advent of mass education, the *hikayat* lost its function as a traditional vehicle of general education. It may be argued that the same is true of Havelock's Homeric epic, which, however, is now valued for its literary qualities. It is conceivable that future generations of Malays will perceive similar qualities in the *hikayat*. The reasons cited above ensure that, for the time being at least, the *hikayat* is read by less than one in ten thousand. It is true that attempts have been made to convert *hikayat* into material suitable for visual consumption: my philological sensibilities used to be outraged when, on the point of purchasing published versions of works in "classical" Malay, I would discover that they were not copies of manuscripts, but "retold" (*diolah/diceritakan kembali*) versions. I would grumble that there was no need for such "retelling," since modern Malays have little difficulty understanding traditional Malay. The process of retelling entails cutting out the huge amount of repetition. I now realize that the retellers understood intuitively what I did not: that works intended for aural consumption require retailoring for a reading audience. Even so, there is little interest today in the *hikayat*, the main readers being philologists and historians.

In relating Havelock's comments concerning the "epic purpose" to the function of many *hikayat*, we may argue that the *Hikayat Seri Rama* and the *Hikayat Pandawa*, as two such *hikayat*, fulfilled Havelock's epic purpose as a vehicle of general education. The colonial scholars who were instrumental in introducing mass education to the Malays had, using criteria external to Malay tradition, singled out these

two for labelling as "the epics." Their fate, however, was to be no different from that of other *hikayat*. Print literacy robbed them of their traditional *raison d'être*.

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## FLUID AND FIXED TEXTS IN INDIA

Wendy Doniger

The forms taken by the classics of India challenge our Western assumptions about permanence and impermanence as well as the corollary distinctions we make between written and oral texts.\* In India, we encounter more oral traditions than written ones, and more fluid traditions than frozen ones. More than that, we also find a reversal of the link we assume exists between what is written and fixed, on the one hand, and what is oral and fluid, on the other.<sup>1</sup> In the West, the personality of the author stamps the work as something different from the raw material on which it is based; the mind of the author is a pole star by which the text orients and fixes itself. In India, however, the anonymity of the text makes it appear to be a part of communal experience, like a ritual, like the whole sky; the author is as fluid as the text.

It is only when we begin to distinguish among texts that were (or that we think may have been) *composed* orally (in contrast with those that may have been composed in writing), those that were *preserved* orally (in contrast with those preserved in manuscript), and those that were traditionally *performed* orally, that we begin to glimpse the complexity of the problem.<sup>2</sup> We find, in fact, that both oral and written texts have both fluid and fixed forms.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it makes far more sense to mark the distinction between fluid texts, whether written or oral, and fixed texts, again whether written or oral, than to go on

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1. I discuss this at greater length in O'Flaherty (1988).

2. This distinction was made by V. Narayana Rao at the Conference on the Puranas held in Madison, Wisconsin, 3 August 1985.

3. This distinction was made by A. K. Ramanujan at the same Conference on the Puranas.

making adjustments to our basically misleading distinction between oral and written texts.

Our shifting textual sands shift still more when we distinguish between the use of the inside and the outside of written texts. To use the inside means to use the text in a fluid way, as we might use an oral text: to interrupt the recitation in order to ask about the meaning, to write a commentary, or to choose only appropriate passages to recite on a particular occasion. However, to use the outside of a text means to use it in a rigid way, to read or recite it without necessarily knowing its meaning at all, or to recite it with no regard for the choice of an appropriate message. Since many Hindus do not read the Rig Veda at all, and no one, Hindu or otherwise, can understand all of it, it has become a canon so deified and reified that one can *have* it and *recite* it but seldom *think* with it. The people for whom the Rig Veda is canonical can use only the outside of it.

Indeed, the “outside” of the text may be used even more rigidly. The book may be set down but never opened, making a silent statement about status or community; the whole text may be recited from beginning to end so quickly that no one can possibly understand it, as a way of gaining merit (Lutgendorf 1991); or one may throw it at unbelievers, as Luther threw his inkpot at Satan. We speak of a policeman “throwing the book” at a criminal, and upwardly mobile members of our society, anxious to change caste, certainly use the *outside* of the book when they buy the Harvard twelve-foot shelf of books, bound in Moroccan leather, and keep it, unread, in a prominent place.

One can also memorize either the inside or the outside of a text. On the one hand, memorization is the basic Indian method not merely of preserving the outside of a text but of understanding its inside. Thus it is said that certain people were able to learn to understand Tulsi’s *Rāmcaritmānas* by reciting it from beginning to end 108 times (an auspicious number), even when they didn’t know a single word of Hindi, the language in which it is composed (Lutgendorf 1991). Even the arcane Rig Veda has stamped its general world view, its way of thinking in terms of resemblances and hierarchies, upon all subsequent Indian thought (Smith 1988). On the other hand, some ancient texts maintain that it is not merely inevitable but actually desirable that people should cease to understand the meaning of the words *inside* the Vedas in order to preserve the outside of the text. This is so, it is argued, because if you *don’t* understand the words you will be less likely to slip in paraphrases or synonyms and hence dilute the power of the exact wording.

In India, it is often the very sanctity of the text that limits its use to the outside. Manuscripts of great importance are venerated like icons and this veneration often takes the form of placing a daub of vermilion on the text. Over the years, the wet heat causes the vermilion to spread until the text becomes a mass of solid red, so that its sanctity makes it literally illegible.<sup>4</sup> The book itself becomes solely a physical object, a vehicle for meaning not through the decipherment of the individual syllables that it contains but through the vision of the thing that represents the deity.

The Sikhs deified their book and called it the Guru Granth Sahib (Mr. Book, the Guru), and Hindus revere Tulsi's *Rāmcāritmānas* as an incarnation of the god Rama, offering it food, garlands, and other traditional elements of *pūjā* (though not, fortunately, bathing it like other images of God) (Lutgendorf 1991). Bernard Faure describes this process as it relates to the transmission of certain Buddhist texts:

The text itself thus became a pure surface, an empty mirror whose content did not really matter, a sign of orthodoxy. Its semiotic value takes precedence over its meaning in the same way that, according to Valery, the Latin sentence *quia nominor leo* does not really mean "Hence my name is lion" but "I am a grammatical example" (Faure 1986, 11).

Thus, just as the oral tradition of the Rig Veda is frozen, the so-called manuscript tradition of the Mahabharata is hopelessly fluid, in part because of the interaction in India between living oral variants and empty written variants.

Indians have long been aware of the constant interaction between oral and written traditions of the Mahabharata. They explain that when Vyasa was ready to fix the Mahabharata in writing, he summoned as his scribe the elephant-headed god Ganesha, patron of intellectuals and merchants. (In doing this, Vyasa was reversing the roles that had been played by gods and men in the redaction of the Rig

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4. Ed Dimock of the University of Chicago told me that he once went to great trouble to track down an important manuscript that was kept in an inaccessible temple, only to find that it had been sanctified in this way. That people within our own culture may venerate either the inside or the outside of a book was made clear to me years ago when my father, a publisher, tired of carrying about with him in Europe the Modern Library edition of *War and Peace* and sliced it into a dozen convenient fascicles. My mother, an ardent bibliophile and collector of first editions, was as horrified as if he had made a Solomonic division of a child.

Veda, where gods had dictated the text to men, who inscribed it only in their memories.) Ganesha agreed to take Vyasa's dictation, but only on the condition that Vyasa would not lag behind and keep him waiting for the next line. Vyasa in turn stipulated that Ganesha must not write down anything he did not understand.

When, in the course of the work, the divine amanuensis seemed to be getting ahead of the mortal author, Vyasa would quickly throw in a "knot" that would make Ganesha pause for a moment. This accounts for the many conceptual and linguistic stumbling blocks in the manuscript traditions of the great epic, and the curse of Ganesha torments every scholar who works on a combined oral/written tradition. It is ironic, I think, that the passage narrating the diction by Vyasa to Ganesha is the very first one that the Critical Edition relegates to an appendix—indeed to an appendix to an appendix. Thus the passage that attributes the irregularities in the epic to its dual oral/written status is rejected as just such an irregularity or "knot."<sup>5</sup> So much for the inevitable fixity of the written tradition.<sup>6</sup>

The Hindus express their awareness of the relationship between *śruti* (the Vedic canon), "that which is heard," and *smṛti* (the later *dharma* traditions), "that which is remembered," in yet another way. Beginning with the Mahabharata, various texts from the *smṛti* tradition are referred to as "the fifth Veda." Philip Lutgendorf (1991) has referred to this as "the proverbial Hindu euphemism for the text one actually knows and loves" and this is true enough. It means that the text that one knows and loves with intimacy is regarded as an integral part of the text that one does not know but that one loves with awe. It means that the fluid tradition (oral or written) is the child—the love child, perhaps—of the fixed tradition (also oral or written).

The fluidity of the Indian oral/written tradition is in part merely one aspect of the more general fluidity of Indian attitudes to *all* kinds of truth. This fluidity was eloquently described by E. M. Forster in *A Passage to India*: "Nothing in India is identifiable; the mere asking of a question causes it to disappear or to merge into something else" (1978, 78). In his notes on this novel, Forster himself succumbs to this fluidity:

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5. *Mahābhārata* (1933–1960), appendix 1, no. 1, verses interpolated [*sic*] after line 30.

6. My argument here contradicts what Jack Goody (1977) says about writing and orality.

In the cave it is *either* a man, or the supernatural, or an illusion. If I say, it becomes whatever the answer a different book. And even if I know! My writing mind is therefore a blur here. . . . I wouldn't have attempted it in other countries, which though they contain mysteries or muddles, manage to draw rings around them.<sup>7</sup>

Further, in response to the suggestion that "the hallucination was not Adela's but Aziz's . . . but it communicated itself to Adela," Forster remarked that "he had not thought of this explanation but that he liked it quite as well as any other" (1978, xxvi).

There is no Ur-Text in India, for there is no Ur-reality. Indians may maintain a belief in several different, contradictory answers to the same question; they alter their definitions of reality in order to let such contradictions survive.<sup>8</sup> All truths being multiple, it is not surprising that the true version of any story is also multiple. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1958) has argued that all variants of a myth are part of the myth, Freud's Oedipus as well as Sophocles's Oedipus. Some people would debate the validity of this maxim for Western culture (are all variants *equally* valid?), but it is certainly entirely true for India.

In Sanskrit texts, the bard may recite a myth in a certain way, only to be interrupted by someone in the audience to whom the tale is being recited, who argues, "We heard it differently." After the person in the audience has told that second version, the bard replies, "That is true, too, but your version happened in a different world era," or in some stories, "in a different rebirth."<sup>9</sup> That is, the same event happens over and over again, but it may not happen in exactly the same way each time, and each happening is true. Moreover, what makes an event in India important is not that it happened at a particular time or place (which is what makes an historical event important in the West), but precisely the fact that it has multiplied, that it has happened many times in many places (Eck 1985).

This same sense of transience explains why traditional Indian thought has expected neither books nor paintings to have the sort of permanence that they have traditionally had in the West. In India, where the neglect of material objects is an article of Vedantic faith, all

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7. Letter from E. M. Forster to G. L. Dickenson, 26 June 1924; cited in Oliver Stallybrass's introduction to E. M. Forster (1978, xxvi).

8. These ideas are examined at more length in O'Flaherty (1984, 10-11; 1973, 4-11, 33-39).

9. *Shiva Purana*, 4.27.23-24; cf. *Rāmāyaṇa*, 7.4.3-4 and 7.16.44; cf. also Tulsidas's *Rāmcaritmānasa*, C.24.

material art is fluid. There it is the spoken word, not the written word, that is eternal. Sacred literature is eternal in being handed down first from God to man and then from man to man (the infinite *param-parā*), just as the individual soul survives in eternity by being handed over from one body to another.

This analogy has deep roots in Indian civilization. The authors of the Rig Veda, the invading Indo-Aryans, highly valued their freedom and abhorred any constraint. Restlessly they wandered the wide-open spaces like Texan cowboys, always in search of grazing land for their horses, never staying in one place long enough to build a lasting dwelling. Later they settled in the Ganges Valley and built great cities, but the old resistance to being fenced in never left them. In time, perhaps inspired by the same, undying Indo-European wanderlust, spiritual leaders, both Buddhist and Hindu, began to desert the cities and abandon their material goods, to wander about as mendicants or to live in the forests, away from the constraints of civilization.<sup>10</sup> The city became a metaphor for the body, the perishable prison of the eternal soul, the trap laid by a material life (*saṃsāra*); what the soul sought was freedom (*mokṣa*) (O'Flaherty 1984, 268–79).

Given this cultural background, it is not surprising that the physical incarnations of art and literature are neither valued nor trusted in India. Impermanence is the very nature of *saṃsāra* (the material world). Books are eaten by the white ants or rotted away by the wet heat of the monsoon, and the secular literature that is preserved orally lasts no longer than the mind that knows it.

Nowadays, many Indian artists, both secular and religious, have caught our taste for preservation; they come to the West to learn from our art historians and conservators techniques to preserve their work.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, there must have been Indian artists long ago who wished to preserve their work, for though the earliest religious monuments in India were carved in wood that decayed, architects very soon decided to build more lasting temples in stone. Stone temples and stupas dating from the pre-Christian era imitate wood-carving techniques, transferred (clumsily, at first) to the more enduring medium. So, too, the existence of manuscripts in India is witness to a moment when the oral tradition decided to record itself for posterity. These permanent art forms, however, existed side by side with the transient forms, just as frozen *śruti* exists side by side with fluid *smṛti*.

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10. This idea occurs, in a rather different form, in the last chapter of Walter Fairervis (1971, 378–81).

11. Personal communication from Rick Asher and Carla Borden.

Painting in India is not always intended to last. The women painters of Mithila use vivid natural dyes that soon fade.

For the artists, this impermanence is unimportant—the paintings are not meant to last. The *act* of painting is seen as more important than the form it takes, and elaborately produced marriage sketches may be cast off after use, to be eaten by mice or even used to light fires. Frescoes on courtyard walls often fall victim to rain, whitewash, or the playing of children (Vequad 1980, 62–63).

To some extent, this is a concept common to many artists—they are interested in the act of creation, not in preserving the object that is created—but it may take on a more particular power in the realm of sacred art. This seems especially true for the sacred art of women, so much of whose lives is involved in producing human services that leave no permanent trace.

In many domestic celebrations, women trace intricate designs in rice powder (*kolam*) on the immaculate floors and courtyards of houses. After the ceremony these are blurred and smudged into oblivion by the bare feet of the family, or, as the women think of it, the feet of the family carry into the house, from the threshold, the sacred material of the design. The material traces of ritual art must vanish in order that the mental traces remain intact forever. So, too, the smearing out of the *kolam* is a way of defacing order so that one has to recreate it; it is a fleeting stay against inevitable confusion (Daniel 1986).

The women who make these rice-powder designs sometimes explicitly refer to them as their equivalent of a Vedic sacrificial hall (*yajñasālā*). Their sketches are referred to as “writing”—often the only form of writing that women are allowed to have—and the designs are merely an *aide-mémoire* for the patterns that the women carry in their heads, as men carry the Vedas. So, too, the visual abstraction of such designs as the south Indian *kolam* is the woman’s equivalent of the abstraction of the Vedic literature, based as it is on geometry (the measurement of the sacrificial altar, one reason why mathematics developed so early in India) and grammar (the central paradigm out of which all sacred commentary develops). The rice-powder designs are a woman’s way of abstracting religious meanings; they are a woman’s visual grammar (Hart 1986).

The explicit analogy between the *kolam* designs and the Vedic sacrificial hall has further implications of impermanence. Indian sacred art, in particular, is often purposely consigned to the realm of the



ephemeral in order to prevent its profanation (with much the same logic that prevented the preservation of the Rig Veda in writing). When great Vedic sacrifices are performed, involving many priests and lasting for many days, large and elaborate ritual enclosures are constructed of bamboo and thatch. At the end of the sacrifice, these enclosures—which have become dangerously charged with sacred power—are burnt to the ground (Staal 1983, 689).

In similar fashion, when the enormous terra-cotta horses are constructed in south India, the choice of medium is not accidental. As Stephen Inglis writes: “Clay is the medium of the worship of the ephemeral. The horse, semi-mythical, temporary, fragile, cyclical (prematurely dying/transforming) fits snugly into the cyclical pattern of offering in village Hinduism. Power, especially ‘outside’ power, always advances and recedes.”<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, the material traces of a powerful ritual must vanish in order that the power not remain casually at hand when the ritual awareness of it has ended. For the festival of Durgapuja in Bengal, hundreds of more than life-sized statues of the goddess Durga are made and beautifully decorated. At the end of the week-long celebration, the statues are carried down to the Ganges in torch-light parades at night and cast into the dark waters. In Benares, too, life-sized clay images of Rama and Sita are made for the *Rāmtilā* festivals and then thrown away. In another instance, the Bengali painter, Jaimini Roy, once remarked that he felt that all his paintings should be thrown into the river after his death; he painted because he was meant to be a painter, and his paintings were simply a part of his life and should die with him.<sup>13</sup>

The word used to describe this “dismissal” or “throwing out” of the statue is *visarjana* (cognate with *visarga*), the word used to describe the “emission” of the universe—that is, its creation—by Brahma. In this sense, all fabricated things come into true existence only by being thrown out or thrown away; only when the body is shed is the soul set free. Indeed, one word for “art” in India is *māyā*, often translated as “illusion.” The world of *māyā* is the world of matter (*prakṛti*), of rebirth (*saṃsāra*), which is impermanent. Against it the Hindus contrast the world of truth, of godhead (*brahma*), of spirit (*puruṣa*), of release (*mokṣa*), which is eternal (O’Flaherty 1984, 11-13).

What survives in the disembodied art forms of India survives in the minds that hand it down one to another. A fixed canonical tradition

12. Letter from Stephen Inglis, 8 January 1987.

13. Personal communication from Ed Dimock, February 1986.

survives like a thread on which successive generations string their new interpretations and translations of the text. On the other hand, a fluid tradition survives like a series of interlocking beads, one fitting into the next, with no connecting physical thread. This lack of a center corresponds to what has been observed of the concept of the self in India. Whereas we in the West tend to think of a person as analogous to an artichoke—peel away the leaves of the external, nonessential characteristics until you find the self at the center—South Asians tend to think of a person as analogous to an onion: peel away the leaves and at the center you find—nothing (Errington 1986).

## Conclusion

When literacy is not widespread, the written word is often the special privilege of an elite, while oral culture—continuous and free-floating—belongs to the folk in general. This was the situation in Europe for many centuries and has generally prevailed in India. In ancient India, however, the Rig Veda was kept within the oral tradition on purpose, precisely in order to limit it to an elite, exclusive group. Thus Sanskrit confined certain forms of the Indian classics (particularly sacred texts) to males of upper castes. Yet the classic tradition, relying as it does on oral transmission and consumption, always floats freely in India, and has remained continuous and unbroken for over three thousand years. The oral tradition has made it possible for millions of Indian villagers to be richly, deeply familiar with their own classics.

When printing began to make texts of the epic Ramayana widely available in India, both in Sanskrit and in vernacular translations, this did in fact lead to an increase in private study of the epic. It also led to a great increase in the practice of public recitations of the Ramayana, attended by great crowds of literate people who experienced in the oral presentation something different from what they experienced when reading it silently at home (Lutgendorf 1991). In present-day India, where literacy is growing steadily, low-caste women are more likely to attend group readings of fixed written texts than group recitations of fluid commentaries on written texts, the latter demanding from them a level of knowledge and participation from which their background may have excluded them.<sup>14</sup>

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14. See the essay in this volume by Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger.

The Indian people as a whole have seldom had access to such fixed oral classics as the Rig Veda and only recently—due to increasing literacy and expanding education—have they gained access to their fixed written classics, for example the *Rāmcaritmānas* of Tulsidas. They are beginning to gain access to their fluid written classics, which include the various Mahabharata tales that are just now being written down. They have always, however, had access to their fluid oral classics: the tales, stories, images, and songs that make up the ubiquitous oral tradition.

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## LITERACY AND THE CHANGING CONCEPT OF TEXT

### Women's Ramayana *Maṇḍalī* in Central India

Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger

A small group of elderly women gathers in the courtyard of a Brahman widow in midafternoon to sing what they call "Ramayana."<sup>1</sup> Most of the women are nonliterate and no written text is visible. Yet, when you ask these women what they are singing, they respond, "It's the Ramayana of Tulsi-ji," that is, the *Rāmcaritmānas*, a medieval written text. Later in the afternoon, in the same traditional neighborhood in the city of Raipur, Madhya Pradesh, another group of women of various ages congregates in the temple of the goddess Santoshi Mata to sing Ramayana. Large copies of Tulsi's *Rāmcaritmānas* are opened up on book stands and set in the middle of the group. Throughout the three-hour performance the women place fresh flowers, sacred basil leaves, or a mark of red vermillion on the opened page in acts of worship. Both of these performance groups are called "Ramayana *maṇḍalī*," or Ramayana singing groups, and both make reference to the same literate, printed text as the source of their performance.<sup>2</sup>

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1. For the sake of consistency with other essays in this volume, I have used the standard Sanskrit transliteration for the terms Ramayana and Mahabharata and for the names of epic characters except in direct transliterations of Hindi or Chhattisgarhi. The system reflecting Hindi pronunciation leaves off the final -a in the transliteration of these words.

2. I use the term "performance" in its current folklore usage, as a framed artistic activity set apart from other verbal communication (see Hymes 1981; Bauman 1977; and Abrahams 1976). Many male *maṇḍalī* "perform" in the more traditional sense of performing before an audience which sits and watches them, even, on occasion, in competition with other *maṇḍalī* for monetary prizes. I have never witnessed or heard of women's *maṇḍalī* performing in this context.

Because these Ramayana performances in the Chhattisgarh region of central India are a female, semiprivate, and nonprofessional performance genre, they have been overlooked by both Indian and Western scholars.<sup>3</sup> The *maṇḍalī* groups provide, however, a relevant arena within which to address the question of the interaction between written text and oral performance, and broader issues of literacy and orality.<sup>4</sup>

### The Literacy Event

Until recently, orality/literacy studies have focused on the *differences* between oral and written texts and the societies which have produced them.<sup>5</sup> Although a careful reading of these studies usually leaves room for a continuum between a purely oral and a highly developed literate culture, the reader is most strongly impressed by the dichotomy drawn between oral and written language. For example, a frequently cited generalization is that oral language finds meaning in context, whereas written language establishes "context free" or "autonomous" language (Ong 1982, 78). Such generalizations do not account for traditional, oral performance genres of written texts.

The application of the oral/written dichotomy to South Asian texts and oral traditions often leads to confusing, sometimes irrelevant, and even erroneous findings in a culture in which written texts have coexisted and interacted with oral traditions for centuries. In the subcontinent, traditional written texts, including the *Rāmcaritmānas* under consideration here, were composed to be performed orally, rather than to be read for private, individual consumption. Through performance, elements of written texts continue to make their way back into oral traditions outside of those performance genres in a process David Henige calls "feedback" (1974, 96). Likewise, elements of oral traditions continue to be incorporated into epic performances.

In terms of the *Rāmcaritmānas* itself, women's *maṇḍalī* performances and the dramatic *Rāmtīlā* tradition are two ends of the spectrum of available performance traditions. Oral traditions which

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3. See Philip Lutgendorf (1991) for a detailed discussion of similar male performance styles of the epic.

4. Fieldwork upon which this paper is based was conducted in Madhya Pradesh, India, in the fall of 1985 under a Albert Markham Postdoctoral Travel Grant and in 1980-1981 under a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Grant.

5. An early example of such studies is Albert Lord ([1969] 1978), whose formulaic theory is used to determine whether or not a work is orally composed, or at least has strong oral influences.

feed into and receive from these performance traditions include such genres as women's wedding songs, field songs, and lullabies. Given the close interaction between written texts, performance, and oral traditions, literate texts are filled with what have been identified by such scholars as Albert Lord as "oral" elements. Under these circumstances, rather than asking whether or not a text is oral or written, the more relevant issue becomes the context in which a particular written or oral text is performed, questioning *how* the text is used and what are its perceived boundaries.

Several recent literacy studies focusing both on this question and more broadly on the orality/literacy continuum suggest, in fact, that the South and Southeast Asian situation is not as unique as we may have believed it to be.<sup>6</sup> Shirley Heath, in a study of what she calls the "literacy event," finds that in one highly oral American Piedmont community, the written text almost never stands alone, but is "reshaped and reworded in an oral mode" (1982, 93). She defines the literacy event as "any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretive processes" (1982, 100).

Women's Ramayana *maṇḍalī* performances in Chhattisgarh are examples of such "literacy events." The written text provides a foundation and context for oral performances, and much of the oral discourse is equated with the written text itself. While the presence of the written word is not new in India, the proliferation of written texts that has resulted from the advent of the printing press, the modern educational system, and the increased social breadth of literacy are still relatively new phenomena. These changes are beginning to affect the shape of literacy events, the concept of textual boundaries, and the oral traditions surrounding them.

### Ramayana as Written Text

The Ramayana is a unique performance tradition in Chhattisgarh because of its strong association with the written text. This can be attributed to the popular and powerful devotional Ramayana text

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6. These studies include Deborah Tannen (1982a; 1982b) and Brian Stock (1983). Stock discusses a newly emerging literacy in traditionally oral medieval European society. He observes, "The written did not simply supersede the oral, although that happened in a large measure: a new type of interdependence also arose between the two. In other words, oral discourse began to function within a universe governed by texts" (1983, 3).



written by the sixteenth-century north Indian poet, Tulsidas. The term "Ramayana" in this region is synonymous with his *Rāmcaritmānas*, written in the Hindi dialect of Awadhi. Many non-Hindi speakers of the region and members of various *ādivāsī* (tribal) and low castes have only minimal knowledge of or contact with the written/printed text, yet even they equate the term "Ramayana" with that particular written version. Likewise, performers and audiences of the *Rāmcaritmānas* simply refer to it as "Ramayana," without feeling any need to specify the name of the text or its author; everyone knows the referent.

Given its close association with the *Rāmcaritmānas*, in Chhattisgarh the term "Ramayana" implies both a *written* text and a *Hindi* text. Performance genres of the Ramayana, including the *Rāmīlā*, are not considered Chhattisgarhi *folk* genres by members of local folklore communities, and they are never included in lists of a fairly consistent, indigenously perceived core of such genres (Flueckiger 1991). This contrasts sharply to the way in which the Mahabharata is viewed in the region. For example, *paṇḍvānī*, a folk genre of Mahabharata recitation unique to Chhattisgarh, is frequently cited in listings of local folklore. In contrast to "Ramayana," the term "Mahabharata" is tied to a story, not to a particular written or oral text or to a specific language. When stories of the Mahabharata are presented in such folklore genres as the *nācā* (dance-drama), they are still called "Mahabharata," whereas stories of the Ramayana sung in the same context are identified as *nācā* rather than "Ramayana."<sup>7</sup>

The exclusion of Ramayana performance genres from the repertoire of Chhattisgarhi folklore genres is reinforced by its association with Tulsī's written text. During *gaṇeś caturthī* (festival honoring the elephant god Ganesh), I was standing with a small group of Gond *ādivāsī* (tribal) women friends in front of one of the typical life-size scenes built in urban neighborhoods especially for the festival. These scenes depict puranic or epic stories, with an image of Ganesh somewhere on stage. This particular scene was taken from the Ramayana episode in which Rama releases Ahalya from a curse which had condemned her to take the form of a stone until his feet touched that stone. None of the Gond women recognized the scene, and they asked me what was being depicted. After I related the story, one woman

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7. Not every regional language in South Asia has produced such an influential literate Ramayana text. In such languages as, for example, Telugu, the Ramayana narrative is performed and perceived of in much the same way as is the Mahabharata in Chhattisgarh (Malathi Rao, personal communication, 1986).

responded, "It's good you're with us, because you're literate, and you know these things."

In the conversation which ensued, I asked whether or not Gond women sang the Ramayana. Several women quickly responded with a variation of, "We don't sing the Ramayana because we're *anparḥ* (nonliterate)." They are, of course, familiar with the general outline of the epic story. They have watched *Rām̄līlā*, and, once or twice a year, their Gond neighborhood sponsors a Ramayana recitation in which the commentary is given in the Chhattisgarhi dialect. Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, and Hanuman, in particular, often appear in various of their own folklore genres, but these genres are not, in their view, "Ramayana."

One literate, temple-*maṇḍalī* leader told me that before women became literate, they "didn't know anything about the Ramayana. They just used to sing their own Chhattisgarhi songs and *bhajan* (devotional songs). About Bhagwan. Yes, they mostly used to sing about Bhagwan, but not Ramayana." She added that if women *said* they were singing Ramayana, but were not singing from the printed text, then these songs were *bhajan* about Rama, not the Ramayana.

### Ramayana as Hindi Text

The association of the Ramayana with Tulsidas implies that it is not only a literate text but also a Hindi text. Oriya speakers living in eastern Chhattisgarh rarely call their own Ramayana traditions "Ramayana," because to them, too, the term implies a literate, Hindi text. Instead, they use the generic term *Rām̄līlā* for their traditions, even if the genre is not the dramatic form usually associated with that word by Western scholars. For example, in an Oriya-speaking village in Chhattisgarh, two young teenage girls singing about Sita's *svayamvar* (ceremony in which the bride chooses her own husband) from a torn bazaar pamphlet told me they were singing "*Rām̄līlā*."

Oriya villages of the region also perform the dramatic form of the *Rām̄līlā*, but it is performed during the spring *navrātri* (nine-day goddess festival), culminating in the *rāmnavmī* festival (anniversary of Rama's birth). In the Hindi-speaking plains, *Rām̄līlās* are celebrated during the fall *navrātri*, which culminates in the festival celebrating Rama's victory over Ravana (*daśharā*). When I asked an Oriya *Rām̄līlā* troupe leader why there was this difference in timing between the Oriya and Hindi dramatic *Rām̄līlā*, he replied, "Oh well, there they sing the Ramayana. We are Oriya." For these informants, the Rama-

yana is Hindi while the *Rāmlīlā* is Oriya. This distinction is also evident in a conversation with members of an informal Ramayana *maṇḍalī* in Raipur. When I commented that the rural Oriya-speaking women I knew did not sing the Ramayana, one woman responded, "Of course, they won't sing the Ramayana. They'll sing in their own language." Further, Oriya-speaking men who were literate in Hindi also said that the women in their villages could not sing the Ramayana because they were nonliterate and did not know Hindi.

### Informal Ramayana *Maṇḍalī*

Against this backdrop of Ramayana as written text in Chhattisgarh, the informal Ramayana *maṇḍalī* of the old neighborhoods of Raipur city might seem incongruous, since many of their members are not literate, and the written text is rarely present at the *maṇḍalī*. Their members place themselves, however, within the literate tradition of Tulsidas.

Such *maṇḍalīs* are called somewhere in the old city almost every day of the week.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes they are sponsored by a particular family as fulfillment of a vow or in thanksgiving for such events as the birth of a grandson. More often they are occasions for what the women call *manoranjan* (amusement or entertainment). One woman told me that she and her friends try to go to *maṇḍalī* as often as they can, two or three times a week, since this is their primary form of entertainment. "Of course," she added, "we go to movies, too, but not very often." There is a relatively consistent core of participants in each neighborhood *maṇḍalī*, most of whom are of post-childbearing and child-rearing age, and many are widows. These women admit that younger women rarely find time to attend the *maṇḍalī*, since the singing sessions last for two to three hours during the middle of the afternoon.<sup>9</sup> According to participants, these inter-family, inter-caste informal *maṇḍalī* are a relatively new phenomenon, one in which their mothers would not have been able to participate, both because of their observance of *chūā-chūūt* (untouchability) and their lack of leisure time, time now afforded by such modern conveniences as electricity, running water, and gas stoves.

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8. Both the informal and temple *maṇḍalī* seem to be an urban phenomenon; I have not witnessed such gatherings of women in rural villages.

9. A few unmarried girls also attend, but they rarely actively participate in the singing.

The women identify with the literate text of Tulsi on two levels. The first is with the printed text itself. Most of the women are from upper-caste families in which male members may have been literate for several generations. Many of their families own a copy of the *Rāmcaritmānas* and have, at some time, sponsored Ramayana recitations by Brahman pandits in their homes. Several elderly women told me that when they were young and female literacy was practically nonexistent, one female member of the household would often take it upon herself to learn the *akṣar* (letters of the alphabet) for the sole purpose of being able to read the Ramayana. Often, the rest of the women would then memorize large portions of the text which the “literate” woman had read out to them. These upper-caste women, in contrast to nonliterate women of tribal and low castes in the region, participated in what we might call the traditional literate culture, even if they themselves were not functionally literate. In their informal Ramayana *maṇḍalī*, even if they do not sing from the written text or memorized portions of it, the women still claim, if asked, that they are singing Tulsi.

The second level of textual identification is not so much with the written or printed text as with a broad, more loosely defined tradition associated with the almost mythical figure of Tulsidas. The identification is a structural rather than lexical one. The performers stay within the narrative grammar of Tulsi’s text, while employing flexibility and freedom in their choice of specific episodes, their elaboration, and performance style.

One of the women most well known for Ramayana performance in the old city of Raipur is Ramdulai Bai, also known as Ramayanwali Dai, or Ramayana Mother. She is an Agharwal, member of a merchant caste on the upper end of the Chhattisgarhi caste hierarchy. She has never attended school but has taught herself to read the *akṣar* and is able to read, with difficulty, the *Rāmcaritmānas*. When I first met her in 1981, she was nearly seventy years old and automatically became the leader of any *maṇḍalī* she attended. When I returned to India in 1985, although she no longer regularly attended Ramayana *maṇḍalī* because of poor health, she was still highly respected as the woman in the community who best knew the Ramayana.

Ramdulai Bai was vehement that what she was singing at these Ramayana *maṇḍalī* was Tulsi, although it was not from a text and, at the same time, that what she was singing could be found in no text. For one performance of the episode of Rama and the boatman, Ramdulai Bai had in front of her a printed bazaar pamphlet called *Rām kevaṭ samvād* [The conversation between Rama and the boatman].

When I asked if I could look at the pamphlet and where I might be able to buy one, Ramdulai Bai replied that she was not singing from it and that I would not find what she was singing in a book. This was, in fact, true. The only similarities between the printed text and what she was singing were the theme and the verbal endings of each line. She told me, "Anyone can read a printed text; that takes no skill. But very few can do what I do, pick out and develop the *bhāv* (emotions) of the story. We're not singing anything different from Tulsi; we're only developing the *bhāv*, like *śringār* (the *bhāv* of love)."

While Ramdulai Bai claimed that her repertoire included all seven *kāṇḍ* (books) of the Ramayana, she noted that there were certain episodes which were favorites among the women's *maṇḍalī*. These included Rama's birth, Sita's *svayamvar*, Rama and Sita's wedding, the conversation between Rama and the boatman at the outset of Rama's exile, and Sita's lament in the Ashoka garden in Lanka. Before she began to elaborate on a particular episode, she briefly summarized the major events of the longer epic narrative up to that point. She often introduced the episode with a verse which placed *maṇḍalī* members directly within the narrative itself. For example, she would ask, "At Sita's wedding, how did her companions sing?" or "How did the women sing when Rama was born?," thereby engaging *maṇḍalī* participants as those companions or as women rejoicing in Rama's birth. The *maṇḍalī* women would respond by beginning to sing the chosen refrain for that particular episode.

The *bhāv* of a chosen episode is expanded beyond Tulsi's written text in two ways. One is through recurrent repetition, which slows down the linear movement of the narrative and enables the participants to savor the emotion of the episode. Performing the episode of the boatman, Ramdulai Bai led out with the following two-line *vandanā* (invocation) to the god Ganesh, which also served as a refrain:

I'll invite and praise him.

I'll invite and praise him.

I'll invite and praise the great Lord Ganapati.

I'll invite and praise the great Lord Ganapati.<sup>10</sup>

The *vandanā* established the *rāg* (melodic structure) to which the narrative was sung, and it was repeated after every four narrative lines. The first two narrative lines were sung in a chanting style, and

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10. See note 11 for the Chhattisgarhi transcription of these lines.

the second pair in the exact tune of the refrain, ending in the first-person future verbal form, as did the two lines of the refrain. The other women in the *maṇḍalī* repeated the refrain and each narrative line after the leader, establishing an extremely repetitive, participatory performance style. An example is given below:

- Leader:* I'll invite and praise him.  
I'll invite and praise him.  
I'll invite and praise the great Lord Ganapati.  
I'll invite and praise the great Lord Ganapati.
- Maṇḍalī:* I'll invite and praise him.  
I'll invite and praise him.  
I'll invite and praise the great Lord Ganapati.  
I'll invite and praise the great Lord Ganapati.
- Leader:* Playing in the courtyard, Rama shrieked with joy.
- Maṇḍalī:* Playing in the courtyard, Rama shrieked with joy.
- Leader:* Watching his play, his mother, Kaushalya, was filled with delight.
- Maṇḍalī:* Watching his play, his mother, Kaushalya, was filled with delight.
- Leader:* "I'm going to the garden," he said.  
Waddling like a child, [he said] "I'm going to the garden."
- Maṇḍalī:* "I'm going to the garden," he said.  
Waddling like a child, [he said] "I'm going to the garden."<sup>11</sup>

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11. Chhattisgarhi transcription of the leader's lines, without the *maṇḍalī*'s repetitions:

Okar jai bulāvongā  
Okar jai bulāvongā  
Gaṇapati maharāj ke mai jai bulāvongā  
Gaṇapati maharāj ke mai jai bulāvongā  
Āṅana mā khele rām de de kilkāri  
Magan ho ke Īlā dekhe kauśalyā mahatārī  
Kahe bārī jāvongā  
Thumuk thumuk reṅnā tor bārī jāvongā

*Leader:* I'll invite and praise him.  
I'll invite and praise him.

I'll invite and praise the great Lord Ganapati.  
I'll invite and praise the great Lord Ganapati.

*Maṇḍalī:* I'll invite and praise him.  
I'll invite and praise him.

I'll invite and praise the great Lord Ganapati.  
I'll invite and praise the great Lord Ganapati.

The *bhāv* (emotions) are also developed through an elaboration of particular episodes, often through a feminization of the scenes as they are portrayed by Tulsi. This may involve either making the female characters more prominent than they are in Tulsi's written text or elaborating and strengthening their character, often making them closer to representations of the participants themselves, rather than "model" women. For performance, episodes are chosen with which the female *maṇḍalī* participants can identify (thereby excluding scenes such as battles) and then peopled with characters recognizable from their own world.

For instance, in the women's *maṇḍalī* performance of *Rām kevaṭ samvād* in which I participated, the wife of the boatman (*kevaṭīn*), not even introduced in Tulsi's account, is made a prominent character and the episode is recounted from her perspective. She is strong-willed, forceful, and articulate. While she breaks the model of the ideal wife represented by Sita, she does not introduce a new model—she's too human for that. When she hears her husband agreeing to take Rama across the river in his boat, she begins to scold him:

What's happened to you, boatman! You're crazy!  
It looks like you'll lose your boat today.  
I'll fight against it.  
How will I free you from this trap?

.....

What's happened to you! Will you take on a new woman,  
And let the children in my house hang?  
I won't let you!  
I won't invite another wife into our house!<sup>12</sup>

The last verse makes reference to the Ahalya episode of the Ramayana in which the touch of Rama's feet transforms a stone back into a woman. The wife expresses her fears that the power of Rama's feet will have literally the same effect upon their boat: the boat will turn into a woman who will then come into their home to live. The boatman's wife finally concedes to her husband's request to bring water with which to wash Rama's feet, believing it may dilute their potential transformative power. She even drinks the defiled water as a sign of her submission to Rama, without, however, fully understanding who he is.

When the boat reaches the other side of the river and Rama steps out, the boatman's wife sees it turn to gold and sink. She laments and curses her husband, saying she had warned him there was witchcraft (*jādū*) present and that they should have refused to let Rama use their boat. Not recognizing its true value, she asks her husband how he intends to make a living now that his boat has turned to gold. The couple run to Rama and beg him to restore their boat to wood. They accuse him of feigning innocence while wiping out their livelihood, just like a moneylender. The boatman pleads with Rama, "I needed bread, and you gave me a cowdung patty." Only after Rama explicitly grants them the boon of devotion does the couple recognize his divinity, and they spend the rest of their lives praising and repeating the name of Rama.

The introduction of the "clever but foolish" wife and the boat turned to gold in the oral/folk version of this episode makes its message, the value of devotion, more explicit than that found in Tulsi's written text.<sup>13</sup> The story is humanized by describing the difficulty in recognizing and accepting the value of religious devotion. The *kevaṭīn* has

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12. Chhattisgarhi transcription:

Kāy hoge kevaṭā tai cakkar me āis  
 Dikhat havai āj tahu ḍoṅgā lā gāvais  
 Otī bharbharāvongā  
 Kaise tolā phandā lā mai churāvongā

.....  
 Tolā kā hai baihā te to navā ḍaukī pābe  
 Laikāman lā mor gharmā phasī lā lagābe  
 Mai to chatpatāvongā  
 Apan ghar ke saut mai nahī bulāvongā

13. In Tulsi's written version of the episode, the golden boat is not even mentioned. Rama feels uncomfortable in having no payment to offer the boatman. Sensing Rama's predicament, Sita offers one of her rings to the boatman. The boatman refuses any payment beyond that of devotion, saying that he will accept something more from them upon their return from their fourteen-year forest exile.



known correctly all along that Rama would deprive them of their traditional means of livelihood when he rode in their boat. Her cleverness, however, does not encompass the wisdom of recognizing the true value of what Rama offers them in exchange, the boon of devotion, here given the tangible form of gold.

Narrative recitation at the informal *maṇḍalī* is usually framed by *bhajan* (devotional song) singing. Interestingly, many more of these *bhajan* relate stories about Krishna or the goddess than refer to Rama or the Ramayana narrative. One singer told me that Krishna *bhajan* are more prevalent because there are so many *līlā* (episodes of divine play) in Krishna's *avatār* (incarnation), whereas there are only *caritra* (biographical accounts) in Rama's *avatār*. The singers draw a clear distinction between the narrative, which they call "Ramayana," and *bhajan*. Although many modernly educated members of Chhattisgarhi society call both oral genres simply *bhajan*, the *maṇḍalī* participants themselves have a clear, if unstated, concept of the boundaries of their Ramayana "text." These boundaries conform to the grammar of the narrative as set forth by Tulsi but are not restricted to his written word.

### Temple *Maṇḍalī*

In contrast to the informal groups, the weekly women's Ramayana *maṇḍalī* held in many of Chhattisgarh's urban temples are organized around the physical text itself.<sup>14</sup> Several texts, opened up on bookstands in front of the singers, dominate the physical space of the *maṇḍalī* and become objects of worship.

In addition to organizing the physical space, the printed text of the *Rāmcaritmānas* also structures the verbal performance. Every *maṇḍalī* session is built around the singing, directly from the printed text, of seven, nine, or eleven couplets (*dohā*) and their accompanying verses, which are written in various meters (*caupāī* being the most common). *Dohā* are sung consecutively from week to week until the entire Ramayana has been completed, at which point the cycle begins again. However, these written, "literate" verses are reshaped by the infusion of materials from an accompanying oral tradition, which I describe below.

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14. I observed a few such *maṇḍalī*, also centered around a printed text, which were held in private homes. These were usually in high-caste homes which had separate *pūjā* (worship) rooms in which the *maṇḍalī* were held.

After the invocation to a constellation of deities, the *maṇḍalī* begins to sing the *dohā*. Every *dohā* is introduced by a sung couplet called *tarj* (literally, “manner, form, or structure”). Each *tarj* establishes the singing style *rāg* (melodic structure) for the *dohā* which follows, in much the same way the *vandanā* establishes the melodic structure for the verses sung in the informal *maṇḍalī*. The *tarj* usually changes for each new *dohā*.<sup>15</sup> *Tarj* singing is also incorporated *within* Tulsi’s written verses in a variety of ways. A phrase from the *tarj* may be joined either to the end of every half line or to the end of the full line of Tulsi’s verses, or the entire *tarj* may be sung after the completed *dohā* and after every couplet of the *caupāī*. The number of times the *tarj* portion is repeated at a given time also varies.

*Maṇḍalī* members take turns leading out with the new *tarj*. If two or more women begin singing at the same time, whoever starts first or continues with the most persistence carries the *tarj* for that *dohā*. After she has sung through it once, or through one phrase if it is well known, the other women repeat it after her. If there is a guest attending the *maṇḍalī*, she is often asked to contribute to the performance by leading out with a *tarj*. Every *maṇḍalī* has a core of repeatedly used *tarj*, drawn from a large repertoire of Hindi and Chhattisgarhi *tarj*. Performance of a *tarj* that refers to a specific event in the narrative is confined to the verses recounting that episode. The following, for example, is limited to performance with the *dohā* recounting the boatman episode:

On the banks of the Yamuna River, Rama called  
to the boatman,  
“Brother, bring the boat to the bank.”<sup>16</sup>

Other, more general *tarj*, invoking a particular deity or describing the virtues of the Ramayana, may be sung in conjunction with any *dohā*. Examples of these are:

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15. When the Ramayana *maṇḍalī* is being sponsored for a particular purpose, such as to build up merit in order to obtain a son or to fulfill a vow, the same *tarj* is used throughout the performance. This *tarj* will often reflect the purpose of the sponsored *maṇḍalī*.

16. These lines were sung in a form of Chhattisgarhi much closer to standard Hindi than were those sung in the informal *maṇḍalī*. The following is their transcription:

Yamunā kināre rām pukāre kevaṭ bhāiya re  
Kināre lāo naiya re

Every letter of the Ramayana is filled with knowledge.  
Listen, brother, and praise its virtues.

Our small *maṇḍalī* is singing *bhajan*.  
Come, Bajrangbali [Hanuman], sit in your place.<sup>17</sup>

The following verses from the *Ayodhyakāṇḍ* [Book of Ayodhya] provide an example of the way in which the *tarj* (shown in italics) may be repeated and interspersed with the lines from Tulsi.

*On the banks of the Yamuna, Rama called to the  
boatman.*

*"Brother, bring the boat to the bank."*

Smiling, the Compassionate One said, "Do what you  
must to save your boat.

*Rama called to the boatman.*

*"Quickly bring the water and wash my feet; it's late,  
take us across now."*

*Rama called to the boatman.*

*On the banks of the Yamuna, Rama called to the  
boatman.*

*"Brother, bring the boat to the bank" (100.1).*

Any of the preceding general-topic *tarj* would be equally appropriate sung with the same lines from Tulsi, as illustrated below:

*Every letter of the Ramayana is filled with knowledge.  
Listen, brother, and praise its virtues.*

Smiling, the Compassionate One said, "Do what you  
must to save your boat."

*The Ramayana is filled with knowledge.*

Every *dohā-caupāī* segment is concluded with a series of praise exclamations, such as: "Praise to Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana!,"

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17. A transcription follows:

Rāmāyan ke har akṣar me bhara hua hai jñān  
Suno re bhai rāmāyaṇ guṇ gān  
Choṭī sī maṇḍalī gāti bhajan  
Ao bajrangbali baiṭho bhavan

“Praise to Lord Ganapati!” “Praise to Hanuman!” and “Praise to Santoshi Mata!”

After every two or three *dohā*, a Hindi commentary (*ṭīkā*) is read; or, if there is a woman in the group who is qualified to do so, a commentary is composed and performed extemporaneously. Printed Tulsī texts come with their own Hindi commentary after every *dohā-caupāī*, usually a simple translation into standard Hindi from the Awadhī dialect in which Tulsī wrote. Literate participants take turns reading this commentary. I usually deferred to someone else if asked to read because I learned more from the conversations which often developed among the *maṇḍalī* participants during the reading of the commentary. Indeed, very few women actively listen to the read commentary, since this is an opportunity to socialize and exchange gossip.

If, however, the *maṇḍalī* is fortunate enough to have among its members a semiprofessional commentator (*ṭīkedār*), the *maṇḍalī* participants become a rapt audience. Her extemporaneous commentary, lively and entertaining, is usually in the local dialect of Chhattisgarhi. Chamelli Bai, a well-known commentator in the temple-town of Rajim, told me that the commentary found in the printed books provided only the literal meaning (*arth*) of the Awadhī words, but she provided the *bhāv-arth*, the true meaning under the surface.

Chamelli Bai’s commentaries frequently give some theological explanations, but more often they expand upon Tulsī’s written episodes in much the same way as do the sung narratives of the informal *maṇḍalī*. Characters are set in Chhattisgarhi culture and speculations are made about the implications of their actions in such a setting. For example, her commentary on the episode of the servant Manthara trying to convince her mistress Kaikeyi to hold King Dasharatha to his promises portrays Manthara as a servant without a servant mentality. Observing that here was a woman who had stepped out of her social position, Chamelli Bai asked her audience, “What servant would tell her mistress what to do?!” This was a servant *maṇḍalī* participants all recognized, and the commentary evoked gales of laughter.

The “Ramayana” segment of temple *maṇḍalī* performances closes with an *ārtī* (flame offering) and a sung *visarjan* (dismissal) of the text. The term *visarjan* also refers to the immersion of deities at the end of certain festivals, and its use here confirms the notion of the printed text as an object of worship. “Ramayana” is followed by *bhajan* singing, and the conceptual distinction between the two is maintained, as it is in the informal *maṇḍalī*. Although women of the temple *maṇḍalī* sing from the printed text, for them the genre “Ramayana” includes more

than the printed word; *tarj* and commentary are considered integral to its performance.

Finally, the printed text and modern literacy have made temple *maṇḍalī* more democratic than were the manuscript text, traditional literacy, or caste-associated oral traditions. Organization around the printed text has broadened the social base of these *maṇḍalī* beyond that of the informal *maṇḍalī*. Although the majority of participants are still from the upper castes, castes which were first able to take advantage of modern literacy, more tribal and lower-caste women are represented in temple *maṇḍalī* than in their informal counterparts. For example, Chamelli Bai, the above-mentioned leader and commentator of a temple *maṇḍalī* held in a Brahman neighborhood, is an *ādivāsī*, though a high-school graduate and recently retired headmistress of a girls' primary school. Involvement of women from these caste levels does not necessarily mean they are literate, however. Many serve as instrumentalists for their *maṇḍalī*, and the oral mode of performance described above provides opportunity for their participation in singing.

## Conclusion

Written texts in South Asia traditionally have not implied fixed texts. Through the processes of commentary, translation, and oral performance, textual boundaries have remained fluid. Informal women's Ramayana *maṇḍalī* in Chhattisgarh still function within this traditional framework. Their claim to be singing Tulsi is similar to Tulsi's own claim to be transmitting the Ramayana *kathā* (story) taught to him by his guru. They are faithful to a textual *tradition*, what V. Narayana Rao has called the "received" text, rather than to the lexical, written text. The *maṇḍalī* are an example of oral performance of a literate text in what has been a traditionally oral Chhattisgarhi culture. Temple *maṇḍalī*, on the other hand, provide an example of oral performance of a written text, in an increasingly literate culture, strongly influenced by modern education. Here the text is more than a conceptual referent; it is a physical entity whose interior is being made increasingly accessible through processes of printing and modern education.

Over the course of my field observations between 1980 and 1988, I have noticed a dramatic change in the size and nature of the informal *maṇḍalī*. Many now no longer perform "Ramayana," but limit their performance to *bhajan*, for example, singing songs to the goddess (*devī gīt*) during the *navrātri* goddess festivals in the fall and spring. Several

older *maṇḍalī* members have died and others are in ill health or are too weak to participate regularly. Their daughters and daughters-in-law, many of them literate through high-school or even beyond, regularly attend temple *maṇḍalī* to perform "Ramayana," but only occasionally attend informal *maṇḍalī* to sing *bhajan*.

With increasing modern literacy, the conception of the boundaries of "Ramayana" and the Tulsī text are becoming more rigid in the temple *maṇḍalī*. Many high-school or college-educated women now differentiate even the *tarj* and *ṭīkā* from the printed words of Tulsidas; only the latter are seen to constitute "Ramayana." They bring with them notebooks in which they have written the words for both Ramayana *tarj* and *bhajan*; thus even these are becoming less flexible and more standardized.

Ironically, the *maṇḍalī* that are becoming more bound to the literate, printed text are the same ones in which nonliterate, lower-caste women are slowly beginning to participate, women who have not previously had direct access to the literate tradition of "Ramayana." Their lack of reading knowledge does not exclude them from such *maṇḍalī* because the performance style is still an oral one, a style not likely to change dramatically with increasing modern literacy.

Tulsidas transformed the Ramayana from an epic into a devotional text, and the women of Chhattisgarh perform it as such. They are not primarily gathered to hear a story, although there is merit to be gained from that, but to participate in both devotional worship and *manoranjan* (recreation). Both informal and temple *maṇḍalī* in Chhattisgarh, although conceptualizing textual boundaries and utilizing the written text in different ways, continue to reflect what Deborah Tannen has called "strategies of oral performance," in which the metacommunicative function of language supersedes the communicative one typical of written language (1982a, 2-3). The repetitive oral performance style, the inclusion of *tarj*, and the vigorous instrumental accompaniment help to define the character and fulfill the purpose of these women's Ramayana *maṇḍalī*.

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# JAVANESE MAHABHARATA STORIES

## Oral Performances and Written Texts

Laurie J. Sears

Scholars who have worked on the relations between oral and written cultures stress the idea that literacy tends to interact with oral culture rather than replace it (Goody 1977; Ong 1982). Oral and literate strategies of text production intertwine in a symbiotic relationship until such forces as modern secular education begin to upset this balance (Cole and Scribner 1981). Because oral and written traditions have coexisted for centuries in the archipelago, Javanese data can help to shed light on these important issues. By investigating the written traditions that have circulated through the Javanese shadow theater (*wayang purwa*), we can observe the interaction of an oral tradition with the surrounding literate culture.<sup>1</sup>

While certain texts may have specified roles within the oral tradition of the Javanese shadow theater, the majority of performers, though literate, have never seen these texts. Thus knowledge that the written text exists enters and enriches the oral tradition but does not limit it in any way. It is not literacy *per se*, but modern education that is having an increasing impact upon the performance tradition. The changing attitudes and skills that accompany increasing access to

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1. Research for this paper was carried out in the Javanese villages surrounding the city of Solo in 1983-1984 under the auspices of a grant from the Ford Foundation to the Indonesian College of the Arts in Solo (Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia, STSI). The purpose of the grant was to document the branch stories of the Javanese shadow puppet theater. The research for this paper was also supported by doctoral dissertation research grants from the Social Science Research Council and American Council of Learned Societies and Fulbright-Hays. Because the research was carried out only in Solo and the surrounding villages, the themes and patterns suggested here do not necessarily describe the interaction between texts and performances in the neighboring court city of Yogyakarta.



modern education are both limiting and expanding the boundaries of this oral tradition in Java today. I argue that significant changes in the mentality of the performers themselves are having an increasing effect on the tradition.

### The Ancient Written Heritage

The written texts connected with the *wayang purwa* oral tradition stretch far back into antiquity. Ras (1976b) suggests that the Old Javanese *parwa* literature (late tenth-century prose versions of the Mahabharata stories, interspersed with Sanskrit *sloka*), may have been the earliest versions of the present-day *pakem* (outlines of the shadow play stories in prose form). There is also evidence to posit the existence of a form of shadow theater in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Sears 1984). The poetic texts (*kakawin*), written in Java and Bali ca. the tenth to sixteenth centuries and similar to Sanskrit *kāvya* poetry, are also believed to be closely connected with the shadow theater. A sixteenth-century *kidung* describes the method of the ancient Javanese shadow puppeteer thus: "To the accompaniment of *gender*, *redep*, and gong he sang *kakawin*, which he alternated with his interpretation."<sup>2</sup> Contemporary Balinese puppeteers still use these Old Javanese texts as source material for their shadow play performances.

In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries court poets, who could no longer understand the language of these ancient texts, wrote down the epic tales in modern Javanese. These tales included *sekar ageng* versions written in Old Javanese meters and *sekar alit* versions employing the popular poetic style of the day, which were also called by the more familiar term *macapat* (sung poetry in indigenous meters). This poetry both retold the epic tales and furthered the process of painting the Indian heroes in Javanese hues by incorporating the mystical and ethical beliefs of traditional Javanese culture. Only Yudhishtira was allowed to be Drupadi's husband; Arjuna, the meditating warrior, was blessed with 1,001 wives; and Bhima became a

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2. Robson (1971, 5). A *kidung* is a poetic text written in indigenous rather than Sanskrit meters. To illustrate the close relationship between written poetry and the oral tradition of the shadow theater, R. Ng. Poerbatjaraka suggests that the author of the *Arjuna Wiwaha* [The marriage of Arjuna] *kakawin* wrote the poem with the intention of using it as the basis for a *wayang* performance: "Hiernaar heeft de dichter opzettelijk gestreefd, omdat zijn hoofdoel blijkbaar dit geweest is, dat zijn gedicht zonder eenige wijziging direct als wayang-vertooning zou kunnen worden opgevoerd" (1926, 184). See also Ras (1976a, 86-87).

mystical saviour for his mother and brothers. Thus the Javanese localized the epic heroes, as had the Balinese, the Malays, and the peoples from the different regions of India. This localization on a pan-South and Southeast Asian level mirrors the localization of the stories that was constantly taking place in the small villages of central Java.<sup>3</sup> Epic texts and traditions mingled in an oral performance tradition that thrived in the nineteenth century, when Dutch political hegemony channeled Javanese energies into the acceptable realms of literature and the performing arts.

### Major Written Texts Connected with the Shadow Theater

While puppeteers might be conversant with the poetic literature mentioned above, the major written texts connected with the shadow theater tradition were prose retellings of the epic stories. The most famous of these is Ranggawarsita's *Pustaka Raja Purwa* [Book of kings], which dates from the mid-nineteenth century (Day 1981, 220–23). Educated Javanese claim that Ranggawarsita, known as the last of the famous Javanese court poets, collected the stories included in the *Pustaka Raja* in collaboration with C. F. Winter, an Indo-European who wrote several well-known works in Javanese. Javanese literati also suggest that the stories included in Ranggawarsita's compendium might serve as an inventory of the stories being performed in the villages at that time. What Ranggawarsita did was to arrange the shadow play stories in a chronological fashion, along with other Javanese myths and quasi-historical materials, to produce a *magnum opus* that spuriously documented the history of Java from the Islamic creation story to the fall of the last great Hindu-Javanese kingdom, Majapahit, at the end of the fifteenth century.

The Indian epic material was arranged chronologically in Ranggawarsita's work. The Arjuna Sasrabahu cycle of stories is considered to be the earliest cycle of the Indian-inspired epics that make up the repertoire of the Javanese shadow theater, aside from indigenous animistic myths that are performed for exorcistic rituals. After the Arjuna Sasrabahu cycle comes the Ramayana cycle and then the Mahabharata cycle. The Javanese have come to believe that the action of the earlier

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3. O. W. Wolters (1982, 50–55) discusses the concepts of localization and relocation as unifying themes of Southeast Asian history. This process should be seen as complementary to earlier ideas of Sanskritization, where focus was on the absorption of Indian culture by Southeast Asians.

cycles, in the distant past, took place before the action of the later cycles. Pigeaud (1967, 140) traces this tendency to intertwine mythic and historical material to the *pasisir* period of Javanese history ca. 1500-1700, when the north coast cities of Java were thriving commercial centers absorbing Islamic religion and blending it with the ancient heritage of Hindu-Javanese culture. The shadow play stories became the links that connected the ancient gods and heroes to the historical Javanese kings.

In Ranggawarsita's *Pustaka Raja Purwa*, the three cycles of epic stories, approximately three hundred stories in all, are recounted in simple prose form (Jav., *gancaran*). The courts of central Java all possessed handwritten manuscripts of this work in Javanese script, and other handwritten and printed versions proliferated in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. All of the puppeteers I encountered in the course of my research in the villages surrounding the court city of Solo were familiar with this work. A few had read quite a bit of it, while others had seen only a few volumes. Only one of the puppeteers actually owned a handwritten manuscript, which he had acquired in 1982. Some puppeteers knew of the work but told me it was written in poetic form. Thus I surmised that these puppeteers were reluctant to admit that they had never seen a volume of the work, but had heard that the stories they performed were recorded in these texts. In fact, many of the younger puppeteers today have difficulty reading Javanese script; many cannot read it at all.

Indeed, very few puppeteers really know the form or specific contents of the text, as was made clear to me in an incident involving the one puppeteer who owned a handwritten Javanese copy of the *Pustaka Raja Purwa*, which he took to his teacher, a famous Solonese puppeteer. The teacher was educated but poor, and the two decided that the older teacher would transliterate the text into Latin script and make money by selling it to other puppeteers. The work was completed and puppeteers as well as students and teachers from the college of the arts (STSI) were eager to see the texts.

It was at this point that a young woman working in the library at the Solonese palace, the daughter of another famous puppeteer, saw the text. She maintained that this was not Ranggawarsita's *Pustaka Raja Purwa*, but a version of the stories that had already been arranged according to the structure of the shadow puppet plays (*sampun dipun lampahaken*). She pointed out that the original *Pustaka Raja Purwa* merely tells the stories in prose; there are no divisions between the stories and each one flows into the next. When the spurious text was identified as a regional Ngasinan version of the *Pustaka Raja*, some of

its prestige was diminished, although it still served its purpose of retelling and recording the stories.

Although the Solonese puppeteers may not be intimately familiar with the text, they do acknowledge the *Pustaka Raja Purwa* to be the source, that is, the main trunk, of the shadow play stories. Moreover, tradition recounts that in the late nineteenth century the Solonese courts often had upgrading sessions for puppeteers at which the *Pustaka Raja Purwa* stories were taught to village performers. Famous puppeteers from the villages would be summoned to the courts to have their performances refined according to the tastes or prohibitions of the palace elites. In the twentieth century, certain mystically potent stories had special versions reserved for the palaces, and the court elites stressed those stories that enhanced the court's prestige. A few puppeteers seeking to enrich their knowledge of the tradition may have tried to gain admittance to the court libraries, or they may have visited the book collections of Chinese and Javanese literati in order to peruse volumes of the *Pustaka Raja Purwa* in the city of Solo. The text could give them new ideas for creating stories—new characters to work with and new kingdoms to conquer. The text enriched the shadow theater oral tradition but, because it contained only the bare outlines of the stories, did not limit the tradition in any way. The *Pustaka Raja Purwa* could not be used as script; it could only increase a puppeteer's knowledge of the tradition.

The puppeteers' creative use of the text can be observed in a number of ways. Sometimes episodes from the earlier part of the Mahabharata cycle, by far the most popular cycle of stories in Java, would have the Pandawa (Pandava) heroes and their allies inserted into them. Thus Kresna (Krishna), Arjuna, or Bhima would enact the stories that were actually associated with the early lives of Abiyasa (Vyasa), Bhishma, or Santanu (Shamtanu), characters who are ancient and unfamiliar to Javanese audiences. In similar fashion, an ogre figure from an earlier part of the epic cycle would be linked with a more familiar character, but the use of an ogre from the *Pustaka Raja Purwa* would make the puppeteer's rendering of the story more learned. In another instance clown characters, who appear in every shadow play performance, might be introduced into the action of the earlier parts of the epic cycle. The written text becomes fluid in the hands of the puppeteers, mainly because the written text exists more as an authenticating authority than as a limiting reality. The puppeteers, steeped in the oral performance tradition, use the text in oral ways—taking a bit from here and there and weaving it into their stories.

The second written text that Solonese puppeteers acknowledge to be a source of their tradition is the Mahabharata. Here the question arises: which Mahabharata? The Mahabharata stories transmitted from India to Java in the early centuries of this millennium were generally incomplete. In fact, only eight of the eighteen books of the Sanskrit version (the *parwa* texts mentioned above) can be found in Java today, and these are basically unintelligible to almost all Javanese. The modern renderings of the Old Javanese *kakawin* (poetic texts), which were written in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, are also fragmentary. Though there are many versions of the Bratayuda (Bharatayuddha), these texts recount only the stories that lead directly into the Great War between the Pandawa (Pandava) and Korawa (Kaurava) over control of the kingdom, starting with Kresna's (Krishna) futile visit to the court of Ngastina (Hastinapura) to try and negotiate a peaceful settlement of the war. Moreover, these stories are rarely performed in central Java due to their believed mystical potency.

Further, the route for those Mahabharata texts that do exist in Java today was rather circuitous. Pak Darsamartana, a puppeteer connected with the Mangkunegaran court in Solo, explained that the version of the text used at the court was written by Partowiroyo in the early twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> Partowiroyo is said to have translated an English text, thought to be brought to Java by a Dutch scholar and presumably a translation of an Indian text.<sup>5</sup> Partowiroyo's Mahabharata follows the format of Janamejaya's snake sacrifice and the recitation of the story of the Pandava heroes by Vaishampayana. This aspect of the Mahabharata is actually little known in Java, and Janamejaya's snake sacrifice does not seem to play any role in the shadow theater performance tradition. A second version of the Mahabharata was written in Java in the early twentieth century by Resi Wahana, probably based on Partowiroyo's earlier work. This version is heavily influenced by Javanese mystical beliefs, and Resi Wahana himself is said to have been a follower of the Theosophical movement that was popular in Java in the 1930s.

These two versions of the Mahabharata are known to many contemporary puppeteers literate in Javanese or Latin script, although the stories from these texts are more foreign than those of the *Pustaka Raja*. The main story that can be traced to written Mahabharata texts

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4. Interview with Pak Darsamartana (27 February 1984).

5. Theodore Pigeaud (1967, 240) records the request of the Solonese ruler Paku Buwana VII for a Javanese translation of an English summary of the Valmiki Ramayana from C. F. Winter in the mid-nineteenth century.

that I encountered in my two years in Java is the *Wirata Parwa* (*Virata Parwa*), the story of the Pandawa's thirteenth year in exile, when, forced to live out of the forest incognito, they choose to live at the court of Wirata. The version of Pak Naryacarita, a famous Solonese puppeteer, is very close to Indian renderings of this story, with each of the Pandawa brothers and Drupadi taking the appropriate disguises and not revealing themselves until after a battle with their treacherous cousins, the Korawa.

The *Pustaka Raja Purwa* and the Mahabharata are considered to be the main trunks of the shadow puppet theater tradition from which branch stories sprout. In the words of one puppeteer, "What is called the main trunk (*deleg*) of the tradition is the *Pustaka Raja* and the Mahabharata; these are the trunks. But the Mahabharata contains religious teachings while the *Pustaka Raja* contains kingly teachings."<sup>6</sup> On the Javanese use of the Mahabharata, another puppeteer commented, "Apparently, the source (*babon*) of the tradition is the Mahabharata but then it has been worked over by the Javanese, in the Javanese way, and has been connected with the needs of the traditional culture."<sup>7</sup>

Both these texts have acquired specified roles within the oral tradition and are believed to be the sources of the majority of the shadow play stories. This is so even if many of the puppeteers have never seen these texts, for they can see the performances of other puppeteers who are familiar with the texts and thus assimilate material from these texts in a secondary way. Most important in terms of the discussion here is the broader question of how these texts are used in the two major types of Javanese shadow play stories: the trunk stories (*lakon baku* or *lakon pakem*) and the branch stories (*lakon carangan*).

### Trunk and Branch Stories in Javanese Shadow Theater

While Javanese puppeteers do divide the stories of the shadow theater into the trunk and branch stories noted above, the boundaries between them are hazy. Puppeteers often disagree as to whether

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6. Interview with Ki Gandamaktal (5 January 1984): "Sing jeneng deleg kuwi Mahabharata lan Pustakaraja ki deleg. Nek Mahabharata kuwi ngandhung piwulang agama, nek Pustakaraja kuwi ngandhung wulang pernatatan."

7. Interview with Pak Darsamartana (27 February 1984): "Sajake ki sing dinggo babon ya Mahabharata ning lajeng dipun garap wong Jawa nganggo carane wong Jawa disambungake karo kebutuhan tata cara menapa tradisionil menika naminipun."

certain stories are trunk or branch, though generally the trunk stories are those considered to be closer to the main story line of the Indian epics. The differences between trunk and branch stories are discussed in the *Serat Sastramiruda*, a late nineteenth-century Solonese court text thought to have established certain standards for shadow theater performances. This text calls the trunk stories *lakon jejer* ("standing" stories), that is, those stories that are considered basic to the tradition.<sup>8</sup> The text also mentions *pakem* (plot outline), another term often associated with the trunk stories and denoting those stories with a fixed outline. The text says, "As for the standing (*jejer*) stories that are included in the *pakem* (fixed prose outlines), in both the stories follow one another, one by one, [each] to be performed for one night. The next night the story will be a continuation, flowing on like the historical texts (*babad*)."<sup>9</sup>

The *Sastramiruda* continues with a description of *lakon carang kadhapur* (derived branch stories) and *lakon carangan* (branch stories):

The derived branch stories are like standing stories but then lead into branch stories that still follow the main story. This is called a derived branch story, which means the story has been derived [from a standing story]. But the regular branch stories are cut off from the standing stories, because there is no longer a continuation.<sup>10</sup>

The main idea conveyed in the text is the image of a flow of stories. The branch stories are distinct because they lead away from the major action of the epic, while a derived branch story still carries on the flow of stories toward the Great War.

A good example of a derived branch story is the *lakon Wahyu Pancadharmā* [The boon of the five obligations], which I saw performed by Ki Naryacarita in the spring of 1984. These *wahyu* (boon) stories are quintessential branch stories wherein the Pandawa and Korawa cousins compete to receive a boon from the gods, usually in the form of

8. The word *jejer* is also a term describing the first audience hall scene that begins every shadow puppet play.

9. Kusumadilaga ([1930] 1981, 164): "Mungguh *lakon jejer* mau ingkang kalebu pakem padha urut caritane, kagawe salakon-salakon, kanggo mayang sawengi. Sawengine maneh lakone wayang isih candhaking caritane, saemper kaya gancare layang babad."

10. Kusumadilaga ([1930] 1981, 165): "Dene *lakon carang kadhapur*, kayata *lakon jejer* salakon tumuli sinambungan karo carangan nanging isih turut caritane. Iku karangan *carang kadhapur*, tegese isih dhapuring carita. Dene *lakon carangan* iku kapisah karo *lakon jejer*, sarta ora ana candhake lakon maneh."

mystical knowledge. Naryacarita, a respected older puppeteer, took the germ of this story, which he had seen performed by elder family members, and inserted it into a significant place in the Mahabharata epic. This occurs after the episode of the Bale Sigala-gala [Fire in the lacquer house], when the Korawa believe they have killed the five Pandawa brothers and their mother, Kunti. When asked if the significant part of the story was who received the boon, Naryacarita, a well-read and educated puppeteer, explained what he considered to be important about his rendering of this story:

Yes, that's one thing. The second thing that is important is the clarity of the issue. Thus the research is important—besides the receiving of the boon, what is the narrative like? What I consider significant in connection with the research is that the narrative of the story is clear. . . . How the narrative is presented, that is important. In my version, I have mixed things up and used the ogre Supala and his father, who are directly from the *Pustaka Raja*. What connects [the parts of] the story is that the ogre Supala was adopted by Palasara [Parashara]. Outside of the *Pustaka Raja* this story does not exist. But the narrative of the story is clear.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, for Naryacarita the important point is how the puppeteer links the issue of a particular story to the main action of the epic. In the story mentioned above, this involves a debate between Bhishma and King Dhrestarata (Dhritarashtra), the blind father of the Korawa. Bhishma informs Dhrestarata that his sons have killed their cousins, the Pandawa, and reminds him that he was supposed to give the kingdom back to the Pandawa. Naryacarita then uses the ogre Supala to further integrate the early history of Pandawa's ancestors with the main characters in his story. Naryacarita's story, which even-

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11. Interview with Ki Naryacarita (3 June 1984): "Ya satu itu, dua itu yang itu, yang penting jelas masalahnya. Jadi penelitian itu yang penting, kecuali menerima wahyu tapi jelas kisah itu bagaimana? Itu yang kalau saya yang saya anggep bobot soal penelitian ini yang kisah ceriteranya jelas. . . . Kisah cerita itu bagaimana yang menggarap itu, itu penting yang penting. Dan didalam memang saya, saya campur adhuk pakai Gandarwa Supala dengan bapak ayahnya Gandarwa Supala ini Pustakaraja sungguh ini. Karena yang menyangkut ceritera Gandarwa Supala diambil anak punggut daripada Palasara itu Pustakaraja selain Pustakaraja tidak ada. Tapi kisha ceritera jelas." The puppeteer here used Indonesian rather than Javanese, and the sentence structure and wording reflect a more modern mode of discourse.



tually tells how Yudhishtira, the eldest Pandawa brother, receives the mystical knowledge of kingship from the gods, reflects the idea of epic flow outlined in the *Sastramiruda*. The main action of the story, the competition for mystical knowledge, carries the story away from the Great War but, as the recipient of this mystical knowledge, Yudhishtira will be better able to rule the kingdom. Thus the story is well connected both to elements of the main action and to the central text, the *Pustaka Raja Purwa*.

Another puppeteer, Sri Kamto, isolated a different aspect of trunk stories, connecting them to a person or a region rather than to a text or an idea of textual continuity. He explained that what comes to be considered *pakem* (fixed oral text) is what many puppeteers imitate and perform. These stories become codified, but they are written in the heart rather than in a book. Sri Kamto then associated these *pakem* (fixed stories) with a particular village area, or even with a particular family. He further said that puppeteers from other villages would not dare to use another village's *pakem*, because they have their own idea of fixed stories. This definition of *pakem* turns around the relationship between trunk and branch stories.

The seed of the *pakem* is actually from the branch story—branch stories that are taken from the main texts. . . . Thus trunk stories take their inspiration from branch stories because of the ability of the puppeteer [to create stories]. Many people imitate [this version] because it has already been accepted, but only those from my circle, only those from around here.<sup>12</sup>

Sri Kamto thus associates a puppeteer's ability to create branch stories, one mark of a skillful puppeteer, with the "performance style" of a particular village area. The creativity of individual puppeteers contributes to the development of a local style that is reflected in the performance of trunk as well as branch stories. Sri Kamto stressed repeatedly that the important thing about *pakem* stories is that the *pakem* of one area are different from the *pakem* of another area. In contrast to the idea of *pakem* as a standardized version of a story, here

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12. Interview with Pak Sri Kamto (28 November 1983): "Sing wijining pakem menika sejatinipun ugi saking carangan. Carangan ning mendhet saking baku. . . . Dados lampahan baken sing wijining saka lakon carangan marga sangka bisane sing nyarang, wong-wong akeh sing padha niru wong dha atep. Ning nggih mung saklingkungan kula, mung sekitar mriki."

the concept of *pakem* as "fixed text" has a very local meaning. *Pakem* is something that a village area possesses, something that gives its artistic traditions prestige and weight.<sup>13</sup>

Delving further into the relationship between trunk and branch stories, one encounters a process that posits the existence of *pakem* for branch stories as well, which are then imitated by other puppeteers. For example, there is the famous branch story *Kilat Buwana* [Lightning of the world], which tells of a mysterious priest who comes to the court of Ngastina (Hastinapura) with a solution for the conflict between the Pandawa and Korawa over the rights to the kingdom. In order to resolve the conflict, the Pandawa must kill either their trusted advisor, Kresna, or their trusted clown-servant, Semar (in reality the older brother of the god Shiva), or both. The priest, named *Kilat Buwana*, is really Bathara Guru (Shiva), and the highlight of the story is a skillful debate (*bantahan*) between Kresna and *Kilat Buwana*.

In fact, puppeteers cite the story of *Kilat Buwana* as a blueprint for the many other branch stories that are adaptations of this theme. The puppeteer Soetikna, for example, calls the story of *Kilat Buwana* the trunk story for other plays that build upon this theme.<sup>14</sup> In creating a branch story, the puppeteer takes an existing story and changes it around a bit. The puppeteer may change the name of the play and perhaps the names of the foreign kingdoms or ogres, she/he may incorporate a mystical debate from a poetic text, or perhaps start the new story in a different court than the one in the original story. Each puppeteer spices the story in his or her own way, thus creating a new branch story. According to Ki Kandha Sanyata:

Imitation! It's just a different name and it's arranged differently. For example, I made up the branch story *Kresna Cupu*. This is only a borrowing from *Kilat Buwana* that's being told again. . . . What I mean by copying from an original here is that the arrangement is changed. Thus actually, although I say I make up a branch story, there are rules (*waton*). It isn't that I diverge from the rules, not at all. It's that I use the rules, that's what I do.<sup>15</sup>

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13. This sense of the word *pakem* suggests meanings usually associated with the word *cenghok* (regional variation), a concept important to the study of other Javanese performance traditions as well.

14. Interview with Ki Soetikna (5 January 1984).

15. Interview with Ki Kandha Sanyata (14 November 1984): "Niru! Mung seje jenenge, lan didhapuk beda maneh. Padhane kaya aku nyarang *Kresna Cupu*. Lha kuwi ya jane mung ambilan saka *Kilat Buwana* kuwi dibebankan. . . . Jiplakan ki

Another older puppeteer, Bu Nyatacarita, who had been a popular court puppeteer in her youth, described a similar process for the creation of trunk stories. She spoke of *lakon karangan* (composed stories) or *lakon bangunan* (built-up stories). Though the stories she mentioned were trunk stories, she said they were "fixed up" by the puppeteers. The weak parts were taken out and new parts added. She believes that this is the way puppeteers create all their stories.<sup>16</sup>

Bu Nyatacarita's ideas are supported by similar arguments expressed by two of the most educated puppeteers I met. One was familiar with the Dutch scholarship on the shadow theater (Soetrisno 1984, 1) and the other, Naryacarita, had read much of the Javanese literature connected with the shadow theater. Both these puppeteers said that there was no such thing as a *pakem* (trunk story); all the plays were *carangan* (branch stories). According to Naryacarita:

In my opinion, all stories that are performed by puppeteers who draw the stories from the source of the *pakem*, all these are actually branch stories. This is because they are not the same as the contents of the *pakem*. [This is so] because it is not possible that the *pakem* can be performed precisely, without being rearranged or changed. Because the *pakem* is only the basic story.<sup>17</sup>

For both Naryacarita and Soetrisno, familiarity with Western performance ideas and the notion of written playscripts made them realize how far removed their own tradition was from the notion of a memorized text. They were making the leap that Jack Goody and Ian Watt (1968) describe, where literate members of a culture see their oral traditions in written form and begin to recognize the inconsistencies within the oral and written parts of the tradition. Indeed, such inconsistencies and contradictions inevitably arise when we try to isolate the oral and written features of this performance tradition.

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lakon kuwi dileh jeneng disalini dhapukan. Dadi isine senadyan ta nyarang ning nganggo waton. Dadi ora saka waton nyarang ora, nganggo waton, iki tak leh iki."

16. Interview with Bu Nyatacarita (13 November 1983).

17. Interview with Ki Naryacarita (3 June 1984): "Tapi kalau saya, semua ceritera yang dikelirkan oleh dhalang yang mengambil daripada babon pakem, itu semua sudah carangan. Karena mesthi tidak pas dengan apa adanya pakem itu. Karena tidak mungkin pakem itu dikelirkan presis, tidak digubah tidak diolah, itu tidak mungkin. Karena pakem itu hanya cerita belaka." Again this quote is Indonesian rather than Javanese.

## Written and Oral Features of Javanese Shadow Theater

The preceding discussion relates how the notion of trunk stories suggests but does not overlap with the notion of a written text. The Javanese words connected with trunk stories all suggest an image of a stable text rather than a written text. In addition to the term *pakem*, other words used to refer to trunk stories are *baku* or *pokok*, both meaning main part; *deleg* (trunk); *babon* (source); and *jejer*, which means standing upright.<sup>18</sup> Some puppeteers also identify trunk stories as those dealing with the births, marriages, and deaths of the major epic characters—the main turning points in life.

It is here that the relation of trunk to branch stories as well as that of Indian to Javanese versions becomes significant. For the Javanese, the stories closest to Java and Javanese cultural values are those considered to be trunk stories, even if they do not support the main story line of the Indian epic. This was the case in a story I saw performed in Java in 1984, which sprang directly from the Indian *Adi Parva*, the first book of the Sanskrit Mahabharata. This story describes the burning of the Khandava forest and the *lakon* is called Babad Wana Khendawa in Java. While the story that I saw followed the Indian version of the story exactly, most of the Javanese puppeteers called this a branch story. They said that the Javanese trunk story describing the burning of the Khandava forest was the *lakon* Babad Wanamarta. The replacement story, Babad Wanamarta, concerns ogre characters searching for release from their ignoble births. The replacement story has all the markings of a branch story, but it has been placed in the sequence of trunk stories because it describes the preparation of the forest for the building of the kingdom of Ngamarta (Indraprastha) while simultaneously reinforcing Javanese cultural beliefs about the purification of ogres.

Many of the stories considered to be trunk stories by the puppeteers introduce ogre characters who are looking to be exorcised (*pangruwating diyu*), an idea connected with cultural beliefs that surround the Javanese shadow theater tradition. There are several shadow play stories that are used specifically for exorcistic purposes, and in the past many puppeteers were known for their command of mystical and esoteric knowledge. Puppeteers served as healers and spiritual advisors, and possessed powerful *mantra* and charms to ward off or inflict magical spells. Puppeteers, through these special performances,

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18. The word *pakem* can refer to these trunk stories, to written plot outlines, or to the texts that are believed to underlie the tradition.

could exorcise those people in the society who were plagued by problems. It is this element of the shadow theater tradition that supports the strong belief in the exorcism of ogre characters and their search to be reborn as humans in many of the shadow puppet plays.<sup>19</sup>

The exorcism of ogre characters springs from the oral mystical traditions that pervade the shadow theater tradition. When we try to assess the connections between trunk and branch and oral and written, we find that the stories that become part of the written tradition are often documenting the oral nature of the performance tradition. Since stories that highlight ogre characters are considered to be trunk stories by Javanese puppeteers, these are the stories that are often written down, bringing the essence of the oral tradition into the written tradition. In some cases, a written text itself may document the passage of a branch into a trunk story because the story is recorded in writing. Moreover, the written texts associated with the shadow theater often disseminate their ideas in oral ways.

A sense of this oral dissemination of material from the written texts is provided by Bu Nyatacarita, who spoke of her grandfather attending an upgrading session with Ki Kusumadilaga, author of the late nineteenth-century *Serat Sastramiruda* mentioned above. She reported that these upgradings were held once a year during the Javanese month Sura, when the palace teachers would explain to the puppeteers the nature of the important characters and the courtly interpretations of the stories. Although Ki Kusumadilaga is a well-known author of *wayang* texts, when I asked Bu Nyatacarita if they used books at these upgrading sessions, she scoffed at me with the attitude of the older puppeteers who wonder what books have to do with being a good performer.<sup>20</sup>

More detailed information is available about an important conference of puppeteers that took place in the 1920s. Held under court patronage, this conference, which resulted in the standardization and "upgrading" of certain *wayang* traditions, was a major event in the history of *wayang* theater. The position of the *pesindhen* (female singer) was fixed as inferior to that of the puppeteer; the mood songs (*suluk*) were supposedly given lyrics from the new nineteenth-century Javanese

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19. The Javanese emphasis on the exorcism of ogre characters is also prevalent in India. In the medieval *bhakti* (devotional) tradition promulgated in the Ramayana of Tulsidas, Ravana is happy to be killed by Rama because his demonic spirit will be purified.

20. Interview with Bu Nyatacarita (13 November 1983).

poetic works; and *pathet* (mode) and other musical traditions were standardized.<sup>21</sup>

After this conference, written *pakem* (plot outlines for shadow play stories) did, indeed, exhibit the hoped-for standardization. While the new standards were most rigorously enforced in the courts, they also penetrated into the villages, where they gained a certain amount of prestige because of their connections with the courts. Puppeteers from the villages went to the court schools that opened up in the 1920s to learn the new styles and techniques. When these puppeteers returned to their villages, they brought these new values and styles with them, and through their performances these ideas spread. Puppeteers themselves were the ones who accepted and spread the new standards being imposed on the tradition by the courts. What was important was the change in the mentality of the performers, and this is still true today.

The processes I am describing suggest a symbiotic relationship between the oral and written traditions connected with the shadow theater. The Dutch presence in Java enhanced the status of written materials for the Javanese, just as the Indian concern with texts had done hundreds of years earlier. Yet while the Dutch presence made an increasing number of books available to the Javanese, these texts fit into the oral and written cultures of the shadow theater in traditional ways. There is no indication that familiarity with written texts improved a puppeteer's performance in any significant way. According to Murtiyasa, an instructor at the college of the arts in Solo:

A lot of reading by a puppeteer certainly increases the richness of his talent for stringing language together, for arranging words; but this richness in arranging does not necessarily bring life to his performances if the words are not well arranged or if the language is too thick with alliteration. Too much poetry sometimes produces a feeling like having eaten too much food.<sup>22</sup>

For Murtiyasa, the important element was the puppeteer's ability to respond to a particular situation in a spontaneous and appropriate way.

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21. On the inferior position of the *pesindhen* I cite an interview with Pak Soetrisno (27 March 1984).

22. Murtiyasa (1984, 4): "Kathahing waosan tumraping dhalang pancen muwuhing sugihing prabot ing oncen-oncening basa, rerangkening tembung-tembung, nanging sugihing reroncen dereng tentu nggesangaken pakeliran, menawi kirang trap-trapanipun, waton kebak purwakanthi, waton kathah kawinipun kala-kala malah raosipun upami masakan mekaten lajeng tumek sanget."

This is also affirmed by other puppeteers, including Pak Gandamaktal, who said that puppeteers should be able to evaluate the abilities and tastes of a particular area or group so that they could harmonize their performances with those conditions.<sup>23</sup> Another puppeteer, Ki Mantep, said that although he could perform in the same manner as the college-educated puppeteers, he had to cater to the tastes of his audiences.<sup>24</sup>

These perceptions complement the view of branch stories as vehicles for incorporating into the tradition material that is not connected with shadow theater. Yet if the branch stories admit politics and other contemporary phenomena into the stories, the puppeteers then bend this material to the tastes of their audience. One puppeteer cited this phenomenon in a disapproving way:

Branch stories are only those stories that the puppeteers use for their own benefit. They can use the stories to enhance their own image or the image of a political party, if we are speaking of the era of political parties. They can also use the branch stories to show off contemporary events, but it will be only their followers who are satisfied.<sup>25</sup>

Older puppeteers are, in fact, often critical of those newer branch stories that have no significant connection to the story line of the epics. They stress that in the past good puppeteers would actually try to hide the fact that they were creating a branch story. One puppeteer compared one of his branch stories to a popular branch story created by another famous Solonese puppeteer.

Puppeteers who are already experienced create branch stories that don't seem like branch stories because they are closely related to the trunk stories. For example, I placed Wahyu Darma [The boon of obligation] right after Bale Sigala-gala [The fire in the lacquer house] so that the story still flows. But Semar Mbangun Kahyangan [Semar

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23. Interview with Pak Gandamaktal (5 January 1984).

24. Interview with Ki Mantep (24 January 1984).

25. Interview with Pak Sri Kamto (28 November 1983): "O, carangan thok, sing dikarepke carangan thok kuwi mau mung ada kepentingan dhalang. Akan menonjolkan individunya dan mungkin akan menonjolkan partainya, kalau jaman partai, dan akan menonjolkan pada masa itu saja, sudah hanya anak buah saja yang senang."

rebuilds heaven], where does that story come from? How can heaven be destroyed? Heaven is an object of worship; in whose imagination can it be destroyed?<sup>26</sup>

These comments suggest, in fact, that in the past the distinction between trunk and branch stories may have been less clearly defined than it is today. When the stories were held only in memory, followers of the tradition could not be sure whether the puppeteer was producing a particular story according to the contours of the accepted tradition or perhaps changing that story to fit the occasion. One puppeteer testifies to this loose connection between a play's title and its content:

It's usually easy for me. I'll describe my own experience. Mas, we'd like the story Sangsang Kencana Anting Retno. Now, in this case, I've never heard of that story. Actually I feel rather surprised. Ha, what is this Sangsang Retno Anting story? Well, Sangsang Anting Retno, what could that story be? Then suddenly I get some ideas. Since these people like fancy puppet movements and clown scenes, I'll use a story that highlights those things. Therefore the result is like this. I took a Parunggusari *topeng* (mask play) story but I changed the name of the boon. It's just a starting point. In the first scene, if I'm not mistaken, there's that visitor to the kingdom, but maybe I'll change it to another visitor. That's how it's done. To be frank, concerning performances, so many things the puppeteers create are taken from their own imaginations.<sup>27</sup>

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26. Interview with Ki Naryacarita (3 June 1984): "Tapi bagaimana coba, kalau carangan dhalang yg sudah pengalaman itu tidak kelihatan carangannya, tapi ada sambung-rapetnya dengan cerita baku. Misalnya Wahyu Darma kita ambilkan sehabisnya Pendhawa Obong, Bale Sigala-gala itu kan ceritanya masih urut, tapi kalau Semar Mbangun Kahyangan itu ambil cerita dari mana itu? Kahyangan kok rusak itu gimana, kahyangan itu pujaan, ciptaan mengapa kok bisa rusak?" This, again, is Indonesian rather than Javanese.

27. Interview with Ki Soetikna (5 January 1984): "Gampilipun kados kula piyambak, menika kula gambaraken badan kula piyambak. Mas, kula nyuwun lakon, kula nyuwun lakon Sangsang Kencana Anting Retna. Lha menika menawi kula dereng ngertos utawi dereng faham balunganipun, mesthenipun kula radi cingak, ha iki lakon apa Sangsang Retna Anting? Anu, Sangsang Kencana Anting Retna ki apa, lajeng kula nggadhani pengangen-angen. Gandheng mriku menika remenipun sabet kalia banyol, kula pendhetaken lakon sabet karo banyol. Dados tuwuhipun namung ngaten menika. Kula dhapuk lakon menika Topeng Parunggusari mung tak ijoli jenenge si wahyu, namung saklebetipun pentas sepisan, jejeran iki nek benere dhayohane iki, ka iki disalini dhayohane sapa, ngaten



The phenomena I have been describing underscore the difficulties in separating the oral and written features of the Javanese shadow theater tradition. “Oral” and branch story do not fit neatly on one end of a continuum with “written” and trunk story on the other. The relationship between the oral stories and the written texts in Java illustrate the distinction that V. Narayana Rao draws between “recorded” and “received” texts in his work on South Asian written and oral literatures.<sup>28</sup> The *Pustaka Raja Purwa* and the performances can function as the recorded texts that people see or hear, but it is what people *remember* from the stories and performances—the received texts—that determines what each new generation of puppeteers acquires from its predecessors. The boundaries of these two types of texts are not coterminous, but they do overlap. The boundaries of the received text spills over the edges of the recorded text, with some of the material in the recorded text disappearing from the received text. The evidence shows a fluid relationship between written and oral traditions in the Javanese shadow theater tradition of the past. Today, however, increasing literacy and modern education are affecting both old and young puppeteers, and the relationships between texts and performances in contemporary Java are changing.

### Modern Education and Contemporary Traditions

In their work among the West African group known as the Vai, Michael Cole and Sylvia Scribner (1981) found that literacy *per se* did not affect the cognitive practices of the Vai, who had their own script and had been literate for centuries. Rather, it was literacy in the context of modern secular education that wrought major changes. While the Javanese have had restricted literacy for more than one thousand years, over the past decades major changes have begun to occur in the relationship between Java’s oral and literate cultures. While various historical factors have at times increased the Javanese respect for written materials—such as the great influx of Indian culture in the first millennium of this era—recently respect for written materials has tended to decrease appreciation of the oral tradition for the performers

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menika, dados terus terangipun menawi babagan lampahan menika pinten-pinten bab para dhalang-dhalang damel lampahan menika janipun namung saking anggitanipun para dhalang-dhalang.”

28. For Narayana Rao’s remarks, see the introduction to this volume, page 4.

and transmitters of the tradition. I cite modern secular education as one agent of this change.

Indeed, the effects of modern education on the shadow theater tradition are increasing. Already in 1982–1984, when I first conducted my field work, many of the puppeteers whose performances I attended used written materials in the performance of their plays, and such changes have continued. Occasionally puppeteers even read from texts while they performed—a practice that would have been ridiculed a few decades ago. In the summer of 1990, when I attended over a dozen performances in the Solo area, I found that some puppeteers were reading prepared dialogues (*jinem*) in addition to the poetic descriptions of kings and kingdoms (*janturan*) that they had been reading in performances in the early 1980s. Reference to written texts has also led puppeteers to gain an increasing sense of right and wrong in their understanding of the tradition. What is crucial here is that the tastes of the puppeteers themselves are changing. Their performance criteria may be shifting from an emphasis on *bobot* (weighty), *urip* (alive), and *nges* (significant) performances to a focus on textual accuracy and the technical skills associated with puppet movements and voice production.

Moreover, young men and women in Java today increasingly learn the shadow puppet tradition in the classroom environment. Many aspiring young puppeteers attend the high school and college of traditional performing arts in Solo. In the classroom, the shadow theater tradition is divided into categories, which are studied separately. There is an emphasis on accurate reproduction of fixed texts, whether vocal, musical, or verbal. It is interesting to note that of the two puppeteers considered to be the most accomplished at the college of the arts, one is known for his excellent singing voice and the other for his proficient puppet manipulations. Yet when members of the college look for a puppeteer to perform in one of their ritual celebrations, they most often choose a puppeteer who was brought to the college from a distant village, who may have great difficulty memorizing texts, whose voice may not be beautiful, and whose puppet movements may not be particularly graceful. Still, his performances are full of humor and activity and are “alive” in a way that other performances from the college are not.

The distinction between performances from the college and those from outside can be further clarified by the ideas of Ron Scollon and Suzanne Scollon (1984). These scholars speak of focused and nonfocused interaction in their study of the Northern Athabaskan oral tradition. A focused situation is one that restricts flexibility in performance; nonfocused interaction places a high priority on interaction

between performers and their audiences, with an emphasis on "mutual sense making." Yet, while it could be said that village shadow puppet performances were unfocused and contemporary performances at the college of the arts are increasingly focused, there is another direction in which shadow play performances are moving in Java today. This is seen in the popular performances by famous puppeteers, steeped in the tradition, who are becoming well known in the Solo area for their flagrant disregard of the shadow puppet conventions imposed on the tradition by the courts in the early twentieth century. In these performances, strong emphasis is placed on interaction between performer and audience, and pointed humor is valued above all (Sears 1989).

While the written playscripts produced at the college of the arts are narrowing the boundaries of shadow theater texts with fixed dialogue and specified puppet movements, in the public arena the boundaries of the "received" text are being widened to admit a wide variety of new ideas and relationships into the tradition. Puppets and puppeteers do things that would have been highly unacceptable as little as ten years ago. As Javanese respond to the modernization and Westernization of the past decades, these tendencies in modern performance environments typify two responses to the changes currently taking place. The first response signals new attitudes towards texts and tradition, with the Javanese placing higher values on standardization, clarity, accuracy, and causality. The second response shows the Javanese seeking to free themselves from the standards imposed on the tradition by the Dutch-influenced courts in the early twentieth century. Both these responses signal changes in the relationship between oral performance and written text in the Javanese shadow theater tradition.

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## WORDS MADE FLESH

### The Banaras *Rāmlīlā* as Epic Commentary

Philip Lutgendorf

The first commentary was the great *Rāmlīlā*,  
beholding which man is saved from the pit of darkness.  
The legions of *soraṭhās* and *dohās*,  
the ingenious *chands* and lovely *caupāīs*:  
whatever meaning each possesses  
is clearly shown by the beautiful *līlā*.

Raghunath Das, *Mānas dīpikā*  
("Lamp of the *Mānas*," c. 1850)

#### Introduction

The annual reenactment of the Ramayana story as a cycle of folk plays—the *Rāmlīlā*—is among the world's most popular dramatic traditions. It is a form of live theater that reckons its audience not in hundreds or thousands, but in millions. Norvin Hein's assertion that "there must have been few North Indian villagers in the first half of the twentieth century who did not live within an evening's walking distance of a *Rāmlīlā* during the Dasahra season" apparently still applies to the century's latter half (Hein 1972, 102). A recent survey suggests that the tradition continues to flourish both within and, to a lesser extent, beyond the Hindi-speaking regions, and there is evidence that, despite the competition of other forms of entertainment, it enjoys broad patronage even in modern urban areas.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Induja Avasthi (1979) includes brief descriptions of *Rāmlīlā* cycles in various regions. See also the article "Delhi Goes Festive," which describes the elaborate

Yet if the *Rāmīlā* is an extraordinarily pervasive tradition, it is far from being a homogeneous one. Its productions range from modest three-to-five day affairs staged by a handful of village enthusiasts who double and triple up on major parts, to month-long extravaganzas involving hundreds of actors, musicians, and “extras,” attracting audiences which may exceed a hundred thousand persons. The texts used for such diverse productions must obviously vary as well. What they have in common—and it is this, in part, that makes possible an assertion of the fundamental unity of the tradition—is that the vast majority are based, directly or indirectly, on the sixteenth-century Hindi epic *Rāmcaritmānas* of Tulsidas (hereafter referred to as the *Mānas*). Both historically and performatively, this text lies at the heart of the *Rāmīlā* tradition.

As the most visible form of *Mānas* performance, the *Rāmīlā* has attracted the attention of both Indian and Western scholars, and a modest literature has accumulated on the subject. Recent studies by Norvin Hein, Induja Avasthi, and by Richard Schechner and Linda Hess have contributed greatly to our appreciation of the history, staging techniques, and broad cultural implications of these ubiquitous plays.<sup>2</sup> My own research on the *Mānas* tradition has focused on the role of the epic text in each of the primary performance genres (recitation, oral exposition, and dramatic enactment) through which it is presented to its still largely illiterate audiences.

The development of the tradition of *kathā* (artful oral exegesis and storytelling based on the epic) appears to have been closely related to that of *Rāmīlā*. Interestingly enough, performers and connoisseurs have often applied the label “*īkā*” to both kinds of performances. This term is usually translated “commentary,” and a Western reader may readily assume this to mean a text which systematically analyzes or explains another. In fact, although numerous written *īkās* on the *Mānas* have been composed during the past two centuries, their content and style has rarely conformed to that assumption.<sup>3</sup> Rather, their authors have generally been talented oral expounders who consented, often late in life, to “reduce” some of their oral interpretations to

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*Rāmīlās* mounted by commercial establishments and also speaks of “the thousand odd streetside versions that flower during the ten days along lanes and bylanes of the Capital and its suburbs” (1980, 10–11).

2. See Hein (1972) and Avasthi (1979); also, Schechner and Hess (1977, 51–82); Schechner (1983, 238–305); and Hess (1983, 171–94).

3. On the history of the commentarial tradition, see Anjaninandan Sharan (1938, 908–28).

writing. The resulting texts have, in turn, often been used as training manuals for other aspiring expounders.

Thus written “commentary” has been closely tied to and, indeed, is a byproduct of a flourishing oral exegetical tradition in which the text has typically been regarded as a kind of script-outline for performative elaboration. In this context, the term *īkā* must be understood in a rather special sense, not as an intellectual explanation or analysis of a written work, but as an aural and even visual experience of its creative elaboration and expansion through performance. Such an elaboration is viewed by the tradition not merely as an expedient for those unable to “read” the text, but rather as its most fitting and appropriate “realization.”

Moreover, because of the great importance which the Vaishnava devotional tradition attaches to the visualization of myth—to the “seeing” as well as “hearing” of the divine *kathā*—the *Rāmlīlā* enjoys, as the opening quotation suggests, a special position among *Mānas* “commentaries.”<sup>4</sup> The remainder of this paper will examine some of the implications of the *Rāmlīlā*’s role as performative exegesis, making special reference to the elaborate Ramnagar production, which has long enjoyed the patronage of the maharajas of Banaras, and also to some of the more than fifty other neighborhood productions staged in Banaras each year.

## Historical Background

Considerable scholarship has been devoted to the question of the origins of the *Rāmlīlā* and to its possible relationship to older genres of Vaishnava performance.<sup>5</sup> Most researchers conclude that the dramas in their present form probably originated in the Banaras region either during or shortly after the lifetime of Tulsidas (c. 1532–1623 A.D.). This view accords well with popular legend, which holds that the performance of the plays was begun in Banaras either by the poet himself or

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4. This passage, from the introduction to Raghunath Das’s own *īkā*, cites three “commentaries” commissioned by the author’s patron, Maharaja Udit Narayan Singh. Interestingly, only one of these (the *Mānas-āīpikā* itself) is a written work, the other two being the *Rāmlīlā* and the *Citra-Rāmāyana*, the latter a massive illuminated manuscript which similarly offers a visual realization of the *Mānas* text.  
5. See, for example, Norvin Hein, chapter 5, “The Origin of the *Rāmlīlā*,” which offers the most comprehensive study (1972, 105–25). See also Avasthi (1979, 47–53).



by one of his disciples at his order.<sup>6</sup> Thus, while Sanskrit Ramayana texts were widely known prior to the sixteenth century, the stories suggest that large-scale Ramayana performance in northern India arose as a consequence of the availability of an accessible vernacular text.

The earliest *Rāmīlā* performances were probably less “plays” in the modern sense than pantomimes. Indeed, even action and gesture may have been minimized, with emphasis given to the contemplation of a static tableau—a *jhāñkī* (glimpse) of an epic scene—accompanied by chanted choral recitation.<sup>7</sup> Elements of *jhāñkī* survive in many contemporary *Rāmīlās* in the “frozen tableaux” which are periodically created and which become objects of worship for the audience. It is noteworthy in this respect that the Chitrakut production, widely believed to be Banaras’ oldest, continues to be performed without dialogue and with only the simplest and most abbreviated pantomime.<sup>8</sup>

The historical development of the tradition becomes more readily traceable from the early nineteenth century onwards, and the innovations that developed during this period reflect the impact of royal patronage. The Banaras maharajas, who rose to power in the mid-eighteenth century in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Mughal empire, appear to have been particularly drawn to patronize the Rama devotional tradition, an inclination which perhaps reflected the dynasty’s need for religio-royal legitimation.<sup>9</sup> The *Mānas* epic’s unique combination of devotional egalitarianism, religious orthopraxy, and nascent Hindu nationalism made it especially appealing to an upstart dynasty of rural tax farmers attempting to assert both their piety before the conservative Shaiva Brahmans of Banaras city and their ideological independence from their erstwhile patrons, the Muslim Nawabs of Oudh. Ironically, it was the East India Company that ultimately secured the maharaja’s title while simultaneously relieving him of any real political power in the region.<sup>10</sup> Given this state of

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6. For possible evidence of the former, see Vishvanathprasad Mishra (1955, 15–16); on the legend of Megha Bhagat, see Hein (1972, 105–6).

7. Avasthi (1979, 58–60) has termed this style of performance *abhinay-parak* (pantomime based), and she speculates that its roots lie in an older *jhāñkī* tradition. Dr. Bhanushankar Mehta (1982, 43) reaches a similar conclusion.

8. Barr (1985, 22). I am indebted to Mr. Barr for having shared this paper with me, as it supplements my own limited observations of the Chitrakut cycle.

9. On the early vicissitudes of the dynasty, see Bernard S. Cohn (1962, 312–20).

10. The company assumed control of the civil and criminal administration of Banaras city and province after 1781, and confined the maharaja’s authority to a separate “Banaras Estate” in 1794. See *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (2: 134–35).

affairs, Tulsi's vision of *Rāmrāj*—an idealized Hindu empire under a powerful divine king—may have offered symbolic solace.

Tradition credits Maharaja Udit Narayan Singh (reigned 1796–1835) with having assumed the direction of a preexisting *Rāmlīlā* held on the borders of his kingdom, and with its subsequent transformation into a grand royal pageant. An enthusiastic patron of the Tulsidas epic, Udit Narayan attracted to his capital many of the most renowned contemporary *Rāmāyaṇīs*, traditional scholars and performers of the epic. Artful exposition of the text and endless debate over its intricacies were regular pastimes of the court, and a number of the most prominent expounders assisted the king in his overhaul of the local *Rāmlīlā*.

Like traditional oral commentary, these efforts involved an “expanded elaboration” (*vyākhyā*) of the production from a modest ten-day affair into a month-long cycle centered around a ritualized recitation (*pārāyaṇ*) of the complete *Mānas*. Spatially, too, the production expanded to incorporate much of the maharaja's capital and environs; a “theater” spread over some fifteen square miles, within which were built numerous permanent structures representing sites in the epic's geography, and which came to be known year-round by their *līlā* names. The royal city itself, on the “impure” eastern bank of the Ganga, was named Ramnagar, the “city of Rama,” and its hospitality was offered to mendicants coming to view the pageant. Large numbers of sadhus responded to the invitation, providing the king with an opportunity to earn highly visible merit by feeding and accommodating them for a month, and also guaranteeing wide dissemination of the fame of his production.

A further apparent innovation was the use of dialogue and other forms of oral expansion on the epic. The *svarūps*—young Brahman boys chosen to play or incarnate Rama, his wife Sita, and his three brothers—were no longer merely to pose in pantomimic tableaux of epic scenes, but were to enact each passage from the epic in gesture and speech. Over time their participation in the production came to include two months of training and familiarization with the script. The latter took shape gradually, under the supervision of the court expounders. During the reign of Ishvariprasad Narayan Singh (1835–1889), it was reportedly revised by the Banarsi poet and playwright Harishchandra Bharatendu, who further expanded some of the dialogues and modernized their language.<sup>11</sup>

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11. On the development of the performance script, see Avasthi (1979, 81–88).

Ishvariprasad's long reign has been called "the golden age of the *Mānas*," and during this period the royal *Rāmlīlā* became the annual showpiece of a court and kingdom that regarded the Tulsidas poem not merely as its most revered religious text, but as its national epic (Chaube 1976, 3: 121). The combination of patronage by royalty and the powerful Ramanandi religious order, Banaras location, and innovative staging contributed to the growing reputation of the production and made it a model for other *Rāmlīlās*. Today the majority of *Rāmlīlā* cycles in the Banaras area and, indeed, throughout much of north India recreate, albeit on a more modest scale, the conventions first developed and popularized at Ramnagar.

### ***Rāmlīlā* Staging**

The performance script of a typical *Rāmlīlā* consists of two parts: the text of the *Mānas*, which is chanted to a distinctive melody by singers known as *Rāmāyaṇīs*, and the *samvāds* (dialogues) spoken by the players. The players mime each scene as it is chanted by the *Rāmāyaṇīs*, and, when the text includes dialogue, the chanters pause to allow the players to recapitulate each speech in prose, thus creating an antiphonal counterpoint between chanted and enacted passages.

Individual productions vary both in the amount of the epic chosen to be performed and in the manner in which it is expanded on through the *samvāds*. At Ramnagar, for example, though the entire epic is chanted by the *Rāmāyaṇīs* over the course of forty days, only thirty of those days, representing Tulsi's core narrative of the Rama legend, are accompanied by enactment. The *Rāmlīlā* of Khojwan, a market district on the southern outskirts of Banaras, also lasts for thirty days, but its producers have chosen a different selection of passages to stage, and devote several days to enacting some of the introductory stories from the opening book of the *Mānas*, stories which are never seen at Ramnagar.

The *samvāds*, too, are unique to each production and are preserved in handwritten ledgers in the possession of the local *Rāmlīlā* organizing committee. Those used in Ramnagar represent a commentarial tradition extending back to the early nineteenth century. The *samvāds* currently in use in Khojwan were composed in about 1910 by a local resident who drew on several then popular *ṭīkās* on the *Mānas*. In the early 1980s these were carefully recopied and exquisitely illuminated with folk paintings by a neighborhood artist.

Though principal actors may be literate, their training is generally done through oral prompting. During both rehearsal and performance, the precious *samvād* ledgers remain in the hands of presiding directors who are referred to by the exalted title “*vyās*.” This designation, signifying one who “expands” or “elaborates on” a sacred text, is taken from the Vaishnava *kathā* tradition of oral exegesis, and its use in *Rāmīlā* parallels its use in the *kathā* tradition. In both cases it is the *vyās* who, directly or indirectly, effects the expansion and elaboration of the core text—the *Mānas*—into an act of performance.

While the textual mediation of a *kathā* expounder frequently begins with the rendering of an epic verse into contemporary prose, it does not end there. Nor should it be supposed that mere “translation” is its primary function. On the contrary, such performers commonly take for granted an audience that is already fairly conversant not only with the spirit but also with the letter of the text, and the *Rāmīlā*’s producers appear to make similar assumptions.<sup>12</sup> While the *Mānas* contains many dialogues and speeches, it also abounds in purely descriptive passages, often of considerable length and encompassing key episodes in the story. These are not translated into prose in most productions but are simply pantomimed by the actors to the accompaniment of the *Rāmāyaṇīs*’ recitation.

The strident, stylized chanting has an appeal of its own. Some informants told me that it was their favorite part of the performance, and one researcher notes that there are even audience members who “watch” the spectacle with their eyes closed (Gargi 1966, 110). Literate aficionados often carry pocketbook *Mānas* editions and read along. Indeed, a spectator having no familiarity with Tulsī’s epic might find much of the *Rāmīlā* both incomprehensible and tedious. Performances are long and generally slow moving, punctuated by endless trekking between widely separated performance sites. The present maharaja’s younger brother was only half-joking when he remarked to me, “The fact is, unless you know half the *Mānas* by heart, our *Rāmīlā* is probably the most boring play in the world!”<sup>13</sup>

While the staging conventions and stylized gestures are not, in Western terms, “naturalistic,” producers often go to great lengths in order to be, in their view, visually faithful to the text. Such efforts do not go unappreciated by *Mānas* aficionados, and one often hears the

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12. A common practice of many expounders when quoting lines from the epic is to stop each line at the caesura, allowing audience members to display their textual knowledge by completing it.

13. Interview with Chandradhar Narayan Singh (23 February 1984).

admiring comment, especially with reference to the Ramnagar production, that it “shows you the *Mānas*” or offers a “visual commentary” (*dr̥ṣya t̥īkā*) on its text. As one of Richard Schechner’s informants noted, “If they say ‘*aśoka* tree’ they have an *aśoka* tree, if they say ‘jungle’ they go to a jungle” (Schechner 1983, 240). Indeed, one is reminded of the Hollywood producer who is once said to have insisted that a closed briefcase on a set representing a turn-of-the-century interior actually contain a newspaper from that period (because, he said, even though the audience would never know it was there, “I will know!”).<sup>14</sup>

Likewise, the Ramnagar producers indulge in visual details that must necessarily remain invisible to the great majority of spectators. For example, of the thousands who flock to the popular *phulwārī* (flower garden) *līlā*, few can get close enough to Rama and Sita’s lotus-covered bower to realize, when the *Rāmāyaṇīs* chant the verse, “The *cātak* and cuckoo, parrot and *caḥor* bird all sang” (1.227.6) that, in fidelity to this line, there are placed within the foliage several live birds, secured by strings around their feet.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, when Indra’s son Jayant, in the form of a crow, tests Rama’s greatness by pecking Sita’s foot, Tulsi’s two-word mention that “blood flowed” (3.1.8) occasions a brief interruption in the action to allow a prop man to pour a tiny stream of red paint—equally invisible to the multitude—on the offended limb.<sup>16</sup> Such fidelity in visual detail is not only a sign of the esteem in which the producers hold the *Mānas*, it also reflects the iconographic sensibility characteristic of the devotional milieu in which the *Rāmīlā* developed, and concerning which I shall have more to say later.

### Enacted Exegesis

One of the most common ways in which the *līlā* significantly and unavoidably expands on the *Mānas* text is in its handling of the many instances in which Tulsi reports the occurrence of a conversation or speech but chooses not to quote it directly. In such instances *Rāmīlā*

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14. The director was Luchino Visconti and the film, “Death in Venice” (1971). The incident was mentioned in a *New York Times* article on the filming, the date of which I am unable to locate.

15. All quotations from the *Mānas* are my own translations; citations are to the popular and ubiquitous Gita Press editions and refer to *kāṇḍ* (book), *dohā* (couplet), and individual line in the “stanza” preceding the *dohā*.

16. This detail of *līlā* stagecraft was first brought to my attention by Richard Schechner.

producers feel constrained to present the reported speech as a *samvād* and must decide how to reconstruct it. A well-known example is Ramnagar's handling of Lakshmana's emotional outburst against his father while enroute to forest exile. Tulsi mentions it but discreetly refrains from elaborating its content.

Then Lakshmana uttered some harsh words,  
and the Lord, knowing them to be inappropriate, stopped  
him (2.96.4-5).

Here the problem *līlā* producers faced was deciding what to have their player say, for the nature of Lakshmana's remarks on the riverbank has long been a matter of controversy.<sup>17</sup> The Ramnagar script chooses to ignore Valmiki's version of the speech and instead offers a short but powerful *samvād* which effectively captures the fiery spirit of Tulsi's Lakshmana.

*Lakshmana*: Not long ago, having fallen under the spell of a woman, he sent us to the forest. Now he tries to wheedle us with sugary words! I'll come back after fourteen years and give him my answer—with arrows and sword!

*Rama*: O Lakshmana! Don't speak like that; it's very improper. Keep still.<sup>18</sup>

The stark irreverence of this speech, an example of the *līlā*'s tendency, shared with *kathā*, to "domesticate" the epic characters, is greatly enjoyed by the Ramnagar audience, which responds with an excited cheer: "*Śrī Lakhan-lāl-jī kī jay!*" (Victory to beloved Lakshmana!).<sup>19</sup>

17. In their descriptions of this scene (2.46.28 in J. M. Mehta's [1960-1975] Critical Edition), most recensions of the Valmiki Ramayana make no mention of any complaint by Lakshmana, although paradoxically in Sumantra's later reporting of the scene to Dasharatha (Critical Edition, 2.52.18), he does quote some angry remarks by Lakshmana to the effect that he can never forgive his father for the injustice done to Rama. This textual inconsistency has attracted the notice of many commentators. (I am grateful to Sheldon Pollock for this information.)

18. From the *samvād* book of the Ramnagar *Rāmīlīlā* (Day 10, Crossing of the Ganga). I am grateful to Linda Hess for having supplied me with a photostat of the Ramnagar *samvād* texts.

19. I borrow this concept and the term "domesticate" from A. K. Ramanujan (1986, 64-68); I am indebted to Ramanujan for having provided me with an earlier draft of this essay.

An example of a more substantial expansion on the *Mānas* text occurs in the *dhanuṣ-yajña* (bow sacrifice) *līlā*. In the Ramnagar script, this occurs when King Janaka gives Vishvamitra, Rama, and Lakshmana a tour of the arena where Shiva's bow is displayed and where the contest for Sita's hand is to take place. At this point the poet makes a passing reference to a "story" related by the king:

He respectfully recounted his own story,  
and showed the sage the whole of the arena (1.244.5).

Such an allusion to an untold story is sure to excite an audience's curiosity and oral expounders must be prepared to supply appropriate expansions on such passages. The Ramnagar directors, too, feel constrained to provide, through the *samvād*, a *vyākhyā* (elaboration) of this verse, making the king explain how Shiva's marvelous bow came into the possession of his family, and why it is that Sita's marriage depends on it—two matters that are mentioned nowhere in the *Mānas*.

*Janaka*: O Lord, Sati relinquished her body in Daksha's sacrifice, and because of that glorious act Mahadev-ji [Shiva], with this very bow, destroyed the sacrifice. At that time the assembled gods propitiated Mahadev-ji with a hymn of praise, whereupon by the agreement of all the gods, this bow was given to the eldest son of King Nimiraja. Since that day it has been worshipped in my family.

One day, taking Janaki [Sita] with me I left the palace and went far away to where the bow was kept, worshipped it, and then returned. Then Janaki thought to herself, "It's such a hardship for Father to have to come so far," and so she picked up the bow and brought it home! O Lord, for that reason I took the vow that I will give this maiden to whomever can break the bow.<sup>20</sup>

In such passages, the "domestication" of the story and its characters is achieved not merely through the introduction of homely tales not contained in the epic, but also through the language of the *samvād*

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20. Ramnagar *Rāmāīlā* (Day 5, Bow Sacrifice). The bow, being Shiva's own, is understood to be of tremendous size and immense weight. Sita's ability to pick it up and carry it is thus indicative both of her own extraordinary nature and of the need to obtain a no less remarkable husband for her.

itself, which is often idiomatic and colloquial. Gods and demons, sages and kings begin to sound like one's relatives and neighbors. The humor implicit in certain *Mānas* passages, such as the dialogue between the demon king Ravana and the monkey Angada when the latter comes as Rama's emissary, becomes hilariously explicit in the *samvāds*. Some neighborhood productions even include a buffoon character (like the *vidūṣaka* [clown] in Sanskrit drama), who supplements the performance script with his own witty ad-libs.

Another form of "commentary" that the *līlā* shares with the *kathā* tradition is its use of excerpts from other texts, especially from other works of Tulsidas, to expand on the *Mānas* text. For oral expounders, the poet's twelve works have acquired a kind of canonical status, and a verse from any one of them may be quoted as a *pramāṇ* (proof) of a particular interpretation of a *Mānas* passage. In many *Rāmīlās*, whenever the epic mentions the occurrence of song or prayer (for example, when the people of Ayodhya celebrate the birth or marriage of Rama, or the divine sage Narada praises him on the battlefield), it is customary to insert songs from one of Tulsi's own collections (such as *Vinay patrikā* or *Kavitāvalī*) or from the works of later devotees in the commentarial tradition.<sup>21</sup>

All expounders of the *Mānas* must also deal with certain problems inherent in the Ramayana story itself, and concerning which devotees often raise "doubts" (*śankā*) for them to resolve.<sup>22</sup> In her study of *Rāmīlā*, Induja Avasthi argues that at certain key points in the story such narrative problems are addressed by using *samvāds* to justify the behavior of important characters. She cites as an example the *koṭ bhavan* (sulking chamber) scene, when, in the course of roughly six stanzas (2.13.5–2.19.1) Queen Kaikeyi changes from a fervent defender of Rama's right to the throne to an implacable conspirator bent on his exile (Avasthi 1979, 84).

Indeed, Tulsi's treatment of this subject was itself an attempt to smooth over a sore point in the Ramayana legend: the abrupt intrusion of discord and betrayal into King Dasharatha's exemplary family. Despite the poet's own "solution" (he has the gods, in order to achieve their own ends, temporarily derange the minds of Kaikeyi and her

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21. On the use of other Tulsidas poems in the Chitrakut production, see Avasthi (1979, 63). Some of the non-*Mānas* components of the Ramnagar script are described on pages 85–86 of the same work.

22. Collections of printed "doubts," together with their authoritative "resolutions" (*samādhān*), have long been a staple of popular *Mānas*-related publishing. See, for example, Jayramdas Din's collection (1942), which was in its twenty-seventh printing in 1981.



maid, Manthara), later tradition has continued to be vexed by the betrayal and to devise more satisfying explanations of its own.<sup>23</sup> In the *Mānas* itself, just before the queen succumbs to her maid's arguments, Tulsi mentions that Manthara "narrated numerous stories of co-wives in order to arouse her hostility" (2.18).

At this point the *līlā* producers, drawing on the commentarial tradition, remind the audience of several well-known stories involving the wicked plotting of rival wives; the stories selected are those to which the *Mānas* itself alludes in other passages.<sup>24</sup>

*Manthara*: O Queen, in this connection I'll tell you one or two stories of co-wives; kindly listen. There was a king named Chitraketu who had a hundred wives but no heir. Through great effort, the youngest queen obtained a son. Thereupon all the other wives got together and pondered, "Now that she's produced an heir, the king will love and revere her alone." Having thus concluded, they plotted among themselves, and gave poison to the child and killed him. And Dhruva also had two mothers. One of them took this five-year-old child, turned him out of the house, and sent him to the forest, and no thought of pity entered her heart that such a small child might be eaten by a lion or tiger. Consider in your heart the nature of co-wives, who give no thought even to the extinction of a dynasty or the murder of a little child! There have been innumerable such cases; how many must I tell you?

*Kaikeyi*: You speak the truth, I swear.<sup>25</sup>

The *Rāmīlā's* "commentary" on the epic is expressed not only through words but also through gestures. A well-known example of this from the Ramnagar production occurs at the climax of Rama and

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23. I was made aware of one such instance of creative vindication in 1983, while I was waiting to cash a check in a Banaras bank. There a clerk told me an impromptu *kathā* (which, he assured me, "is in the Ramayana"; adding, on further thought, "Well, it's in *some* Ramayana"), which completely exonerated Kaikeyi of guilt by having Rama himself secretly compel her to demand the two boons. She was thus revealed as a model devotee whose obedience was put to the harshest possible test by the Lord, a transformation which reminded me of certain apocryphal stories told of Judas Iscariot.

24. The Chitraketu story is alluded to in *Mānas*, 1.79.2; the well-known Dhruva story, which is told at length in the *Bhāgavata purāṇa*, is mentioned in *Mānas*, 1.26.5.

25. Ramnagar *Rāmīlā* (Day 8, Kaikeyi's Willfulness).

Lakshmana's verbal duel with the angry sage Parashurama when, following the heated argument that has raged through many stanzas, the sage suddenly capitulates and recognizes Rama's divinity. Just what precipitates his abrupt change of heart has long been a matter of controversy among commentators. About fifty years ago the Ramnagar *vyās*, Kamlasharan, added a striking visual innovation which depended on an unusual interpretation of a single line from Rama's final admonition to the sage.

“Truly I speak, and not to flatter my family.

A son of Raghu in battle does not fear even death,  
yet such is the greatness of the Brahman lineage  
that even a fearless one stands in awe of you.”

Hearing Raghupati's sweet and mysterious words  
the curtain of Parashurama's understanding was  
lifted (1.284.4-6).

Rama's speech, though innocuous enough and essentially a reiteration of his earlier protestations, is termed by the poet *gūrha* (mysterious or allusive) and appears to trigger the sage's capitulation. At Ramnagar, when the *Rāmāyaṇīs* chant the words “such is the greatness of the Brahman lineage,” the boy playing Rama pushes aside his upper garment and points significantly to his bare chest. By this gesture, *līlā* aficionados understand that he is pointing to the footprint of the sage Bhrigu, Parashurama's own grandfather, which Vaishnavas believe to be one of the physical signs by which the incarnate Lord can unfailingly be recognized.<sup>26</sup> Through this gesture, Rama's words take on a new and ironic meaning, revealing to the angry sage that the smiling “son of Raghu” before him is in reality the eternal Lord of the universe.

Such “commentarial” decisions, it may be added, are never made lightly. The lore of the Ramnagar production includes many tales of furious debates that raged over what must appear to outsiders to be seemingly minor details of staging, costuming, and dialogue. An instance of such interpretive feuding involves a story told of Kamlasharan concerning the scene in which Rama orders Lakshmana to go

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26. For the story of Bhrigu's assault on Vishnu, see *Padma purāṇa*, 6.282.8-93; translated in Wendy D. O'Flaherty (1975, 149-54). The *līlā*'s interpretation of this verse is mentioned in the encyclopedic commentary *Mānas-pīyūṣ* as the opinion of “certain profound men” (Sharan [1925-1932], 5: 691). It may have been one of the *bhāvas* (emotional insights) of the great turn-of-the-century *vyās*, Ramkumar Mishra, who was the guru of Kamlasharan's teacher.

kill Ravana's son, Meghanada, and then tells the other warriors in his entourage,

O Jamavant, Sugriva, and Vibhishana,  
you three remain with the army (6.75.10).

The question that vexed the *līlā* staggers here was "which army?": Rama's or Lakshmana's? It is said that some seventy years ago Kamlasharan, the *vyās* in charge of the *svarūps* in Ramnagar, after mulling over the matter for many years decided that he preferred the latter interpretation. Reasoning that Rama would not choose to risk further injury to Lakshmana (who had already been mortally wounded by one of Meghanada's magic weapons), Kamlasharan ordered the three players to depart with Lakshmana. The other principal *vyās* disagreed, however, and insisted that his actors remain with Rama.

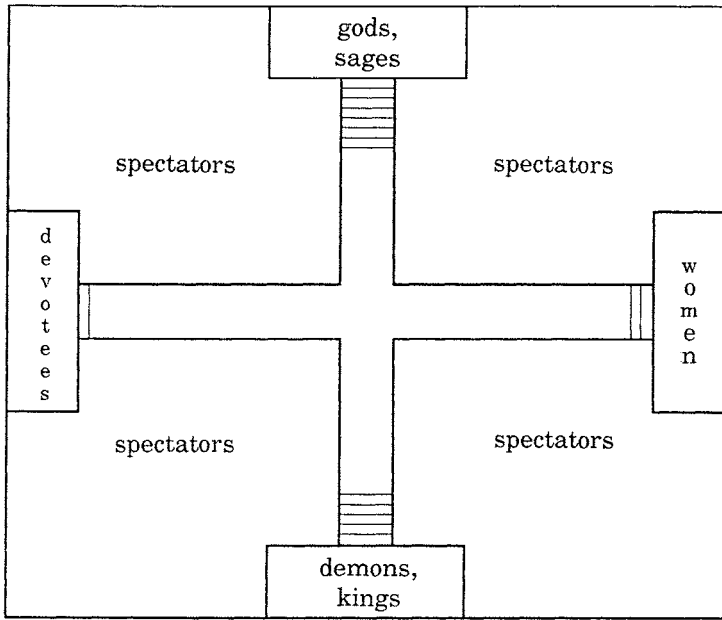
This argument simmered through several consecutive *līlā* seasons, with the two protagonists eventually debating the question in the presence of the maharaja. In the course of this debate, such factors as the topography of Lanka and the movements of the two armies were analyzed and plotted in great detail, with the maharaja ultimately, on strategic grounds, siding with Kamlasharan's opponent.<sup>27</sup> To this day, faithful to this reading of the line, the three warriors remain at Rama's side during Lakshmana's final confrontation with Meghanada.

The Ramnagar cycle, with its expansive and specially constructed environments, presents a particularly striking example of the *Rāmīlīlā*'s spatial elaboration of the *Mānas* text, yet even modest local productions have evolved methods of staging which "comment" no less effectively on Tulsi's epic. At Shivpur, a village on the northwestern outskirts of Banaras, virtually the entire *Rāmīlīlā* transpires within a single large enclosure oriented to the four cardinal directions. Each of the walled sides has an elevated dais at its center: that to the north is approached by seven steps and surmounted by a throne; the southern dais is elevated five steps and likewise bears a throne; the eastern dais is raised only two steps; and that to the west is but a single step above ground level. These platforms are linked by raised walkways which intersect at the center of the enclosure, dividing the space into four rectangles.

As Bhanushankar Mehta (1982, 40-43) has noted in his study of this *līlā*, the four-square plan is immediately suggestive of Tulsi's

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27. Recounted by Chandradhar Narayan Singh in an interview (23 February 1984).



allegory of the Manas Lake and its four *ghats* (banks), which enclose the reservoir of Rama's *carit*: his "movements" in our world.<sup>28</sup> The high northern dais, with its symbolic number of steps (reflecting both traditional cosmology and the sequence of seven books, labelled "descents," through which Tulsi narrates his tale) is the seat of the *svarūps*, other deities, and divine sages. The lower dais to the south, with its five steps symbolic of the "fivefold" material world, is the seat of this-worldly kings: Dasharatha, Janaka, Vali, Sugriva, and, of course, Ravana.

The orientation of these two platforms conforms to Hindu conventions of symbolic geography, the north being associated with the gods and sages, and the south with demons, the underworld, and death. The eastern platform is preeminently the seat of female characters:

28. The diagram shown here is based on one Mehta (1982) provides. The allegory of the lake is presented in *Mānas*, 1.35.7–1.43; the mystical diagram it suggests as well as its various interpretations are favorite topics of traditional commentators (see Sharan [1925–1932], 1: 583ff.).

Kaushalya (whom Tulsi, in a well-known verse, hails as “the eastern sky . . . in which appeared the beautiful moon of Raghupati”), Kaikeyi, and Sita (who is from the eastern kingdom of Videha). The western and lowest platform, said to represent the condition of humble devotees, is used by the *Rāmāyaṇīs*.

Most of the action of the cycle occurs on the bisecting runways which link the platforms and literally chart “the goings of Rama” (*Rāma-ayana*)—one traditional interpretation of the Sanskrit epic’s name. The main axis of the narrative is the north-south path, along which the Lord descends and engages in the adventures which eventually carry him to its opposite pole and to a decisive confrontation with his arch rival. His mission accomplished, he returns in triumph and reascends the seven steps to occupy his throne in Ayodhya. The spectators occupy the four quadrants bounded by the runways, which place them literally in the midst of the story: in the world visited and transformed by Rama.

### *Rāmlīlā* and Devotional *Sādhanā*

What particularly distinguishes the *Rāmlīlā* from other traditions of *Mānas* commentary is its visual and tangible dimension; that is, it enables devotees not only to hear but also to see and, indeed, to participate in the recreation of the story. The importance of the visual dimension in Hindu worship need hardly be reiterated here, but we must note that the Vaishnava devotional tradition of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries gave special importance to meditative techniques of visualization and role-playing.<sup>29</sup> Devotees of the period sought to “realize” (in the most literal sense of the term) and eventually to enter into the Lord’s *līlā* (divine play), which was conceived of not as a temporal event in the mythical past but as eternal reality.<sup>30</sup> Initiates were taught to “reenact” the cultic myths in their daily visualizations, sometimes with the assistance of iconographic treatises detailing, for example, the ground plan of Rama’s paradisaical capital, and the costumes and ornaments of his courtiers and attendants (Singh 1957, 238–40, 245–47, 274).

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29. For an illuminating treatment of the visual dimension of Hindu worship, see Diana Eck (1983).

30. The most substantial work on this tradition in English (though with exclusive reference to Krishna *bhakti*) is that of David Haberman (1988). On the equivalent Rama *bhakti* tradition, see Bhagavatiprasad Singh’s pioneering study (1957).

Like the earlier tantric tradition, which in certain respects it resembled, the devotional path of the *rasik* (spiritual “aesthete” or “connoisseur”) eventually attracted elite patronage and became popularized as a pervasive religio-cultural movement. Its aesthetic influence extended far beyond the comparatively narrow circle of those who actually practiced its characteristic (and rigorous) *sādhana* (meditative regimen).

The tradition declined in importance during the latter half of the nineteenth century, due in part to the increasing conventionality of its art and literature, the economic decline of its princely patrons, the puritanical and aniconic ideals of both Victorian critics and Hindu Renaissance reformers, and the rise of a more this-worldly nationalist consciousness. Yet although the *rasik* traditions of Rama and Krishnaite *bhakti* (devotionalism) have all but vanished from the visible mainstream of contemporary Hinduism—and their history and literature has consequently been largely ignored by academic scholars—their opulent visionary aesthetic and characteristic emphasis on religious role-playing continue to exert an influence on popular Vaishnavism in north India.

One vestige of this influence is the *Rāmāīlā* tradition itself, which evolved into its contemporary form during the heyday of *rasik* devotionalism. Through the *Rāmāīlā*, devotees “realize” the events of the *Mānas* in a variety of ways and assume various roles in relation to its characters. The “spatial exegesis” of the text facilitates this identification, for the *īlā* lays the template of the Ramayana over the familiar contours of neighborhood and kingdom, restructuring the world according to the paradigmatic geography of myth.

At Ramnagar and in most other Banaras productions, it is the producers’ own neighborhood that becomes Ayodhya, Rama’s once and future kingdom, the transcendent realm to which his devotees aspire. The wild lands of his wanderings and the kingdom of his demonic foe are placed at a comfortable remove, usually on the outskirts of the inhabited area. Neighborhood residents thus become the citizens of the hero’s own realm, participants rather than spectators, while more ambitiously ardent devotees often carve out distinctive roles for themselves.

Quite apart from the adult actors, who generally play the same parts year after year and are often known throughout their localities by their *īlā* names, there are many devotees who undertake service roles in relation to the child-deities. These services include carrying them from scene to scene on their shoulders, entertaining them in their homes, garlanding them, fanning them, and offering them refresh-

ments.<sup>31</sup> In such activities they not only recreate, for responsive, flesh-and-blood deities, the conventions of temple service (*pūjā* or *sevā*), but also externalize certain of the meditations of *rasik-sādhanā*, in which the divine characters and settings of the *Mānas* are systematically visualized by the devotee. In turn, the devotee inwardly assumes an appropriate “spiritual body” with which to enter the scene and offer service to the Lord and his consort.<sup>32</sup>

The relationship between *Rāmīlā* plays and meditative visualizations becomes clearer if we understand that, from the devotee’s perspective, the two kinds of “realization” of the story are not fundamentally different. Both appear to be imaginative projections—one inward, one outward—of a mythic scenario. Conversely, however, Vaishnava theology prefers to regard physical and mental life as “projection” and the scenario as real.

The ultimate goal of *rasik* mystical praxis was to enable the adept to permanently enter the myth. While the treatises sometimes warn of the dangers of externalizing the meditations (many of which had erotic themes), the hagiographies of the tradition nevertheless celebrated those visionaries whose experiences blurred the boundary line demarcating mundane world and eternal *līlā*.<sup>33</sup> Yet while the lore of the *Rāmīlā* similarly celebrates players who “disappeared” into their roles, the plays routinely straddle the boundary in more subtle ways.<sup>34</sup> Anyone who has ever carefully observed a Banaras *Rāmīlā* can attest to the high degree of identification with the story achieved by many audiences, and to the paradoxical fact that the little boys in gilded tiaras truly are, to devout spectators, at once both children and deities.

31. Once they have put on their crowns, the *svarūps* are considered to be incarnate deities and their feet are never supposed to touch the ground except when they are enacting scenes; thus they are carried between *līlā* sites by devotees.

32. Singh (1957, 226ff.) gives a detailed description of this *sādhanā*.

33. Oral expounders are fond of retelling stories of such devotees as the child-saint Prayagdas (early eighteenth century?), who imagined that he was Sita’s younger brother and set off for Ayodhya to fetch her from her in-laws’ house. In another story, the same saint went mad with grief when he learned of the princess and Rama’s departure for the forest, and undertook to deliver cots and sandals to the wayfarers at Panchavati (Singh 1957, 402–3).

34. Regarding the former, probably the most famous such story in Banaras is that of the nineteenth-century Hanuman in the Chitrakut production, who leaped the Varuna River in response to the challenge of a mocking British official. Successfully completing the superhuman jump, he is said to have expired on the further shore (Avasthi 1979, 62; Mehta 1982, 43).

Indeed, many devotees are still careful to insist that the performances are not “plays” at all, but glimpses of reality.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

Though I have cited the role of elite patronage as an important factor in the development of the *kathā* and *līlā* traditions of *Mānas* performance in Banaras, I must caution the reader against assuming, in this context, any firm distinction between “elite” and “popular” traditions. A literary epic composed in “common speech” and set in the familiar form of an oral *kathā*, the *Mānas* has for centuries been a text that bridged the gulf between rich and poor, urban and rural, lettered and unlettered. While it is recognized today as the masterpiece of premodern Hindi literature and is the subject of an impressive body of scholarship, it remains—in its ubiquitous and inexpensive bazaar editions—the text that a newly or marginally literate person is most likely to want to read and to possess. It is also the book that an illiterate person is most likely to be able to quote.

Similarly, although *rasik* theology and mystical praxis acquired, for a time, a certain vogue in courtly circles (often in a somewhat vulgarized form), the movement was largely propagated by Ramanandi sadhus, whose initiated pupils included many devotees of very humble status. The *rasik* preceptors’ vision of an immanent and tangible “other world” accorded well with folk conceptions of the reality of mythic characters and events, and also with the pervasive popular longing for a harmonious and perfect kingdom.

Although Tulsi’s epic is often conceptualized (and even worshipped) in the reified form of a manuscript or printed book, it remains more typically experienced as a chant, a song, a discourse, or a pageant. Each of these performance modes tends to abridge, expand on, or otherwise alter its text. While the *Rāmlīlā* is often called a *ṭīkā* (commentary), this ascription must be understood in the special sense in which this term is used in reference to *Mānas* performance. Like the Biblical commentary (both oral and written) of medieval Christian monastics, traditional *Mānas* exegesis (to paraphrase Jean LeClercq) is “more exhortation than explanation” and its theology is one of “admiration” rather than “speculation” (1961, 154, 226).

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35. On the theological distinction between *līlā* and *nāṭak*, see Thakur Prasad Dvivedi (1976, 50–51). I am grateful to Linda Hess for having supplied me with a copy of this article.



Significantly, both the early Christian and the Vaishnava commentarial traditions arose within a milieu of intense involvement with scripture. Saturation with the sacred word, both through the daily *lectio divina* of the monasteries and the constant *pārāyaṇ* recitation of the *Mānas*, encouraged its emotional savoring and endless re-presentation. The real aim of such “commentary” is less intellectual understanding than the emotional experiencing of scripture. The tangible, encompassing world of the *Rāmlīlā*, in which the written text is but one element in a captivating sensory totality, thus bids fair to represent, from the devotee’s standpoint, the ultimate “commentary” on the *Mānas*. If *kathā*-style discourse “expands” on the text, the *Rāmlīlā*’s “commentary” pushes that expansion to the limit, challenging the spatial and temporal boundaries which separate performance and “real” life, to create (like the *rasik* mystical exercises) a new reality into which the audience may enter.

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## EPIC TRANSMISSION AND ADAPTATION

### A Folk Ramayana in South India

Stuart H. Blackburn

Folk epics are not without a certain ambiguity, the ambivalence inherent in a marked category.\* Of all the major narrative genres, epic is that least associated with folk tradition. Epic has been considered a literary form, so much so that even folklorists have argued that the folk epic only develops from contact with writing.<sup>1</sup> That position may be overstated, but the effect of literary traditions and written models on the emergence of a folk epic can also be easily underestimated. This ambiguity is revealed in the curious fact that the major theoretical advance in the study of the folk epic resulted from an effort to settle an issue in literary scholarship. In truth, we know very little about what distinguishes folk and classical, oral and written epics, or what might unite them.

The boundary between written text and oral performance is particularly obscure in a culture like India that has produced (and continues to produce) epics in all shapes and sizes, and has transmitted them by every possible combination of oral and written media. Until very recently, "epic" in India meant the two great Sanskrit epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, but we now know that these are only a small fraction of India's total epic tradition.<sup>2</sup> Good textual and

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\*An earlier version of this paper was published in *The Heroic Process: Form, Function, and Fantasy in Folk Epic*, edited by B. Almqvist et al. (Dublin: Glendale Press, 1987). It is reprinted here, with minor editorial changes, by permission of Glendale Press.

1. See, for example, Ruth Finnegan (1970, 108-10; 1977, 22-24, 160-68); Dennis Tedlock (1983, 250); and Jeff Opland (1983, 143-46, 232).

2. For overviews of the Sanskrit epics, see Barend van Nooten (1978, 49-75) and John D. Smith (1980, 48-78).

contextual data is now available on a dozen folk epics, less complete reports on another dozen, and still others are being uncovered.<sup>3</sup>

The relations between these folk epics and the Sanskrit epics are varied. Some have no significant link to the pan-Indian epics, but many do. Of the latter folk epics, some are sequels to the Sanskrit epics, whose heroes and heroines are reincarnated to carry on business left unfinished in an earlier telling. However, even these sequel folk epics are often only tenuously related to the Sanskrit epics; the folk hero may be identified as Rama who battles someone identified as Ravana (as in the Ramayana), but the resemblance extends no further. Another group of folk epics is more substantially linked to the Sanskrit ones: they do not continue the action (as the sequels do); they repeat it (like a rerun). For reasons that remain largely speculative, these folk epics (in Southeast Asia as well as in India) are very often the basis of various performance genres, ranging from drama to dance-drama and shadow puppetry.

The south Indian Kerala shadow puppet tradition is an example of this "rerun" epic tradition. Briefly stated, a medieval Ramayana composed in Tamil has been transmitted and preserved almost verbatim in what is a village-based tradition of shadow puppetry. The close correspondence between source text and oral performance throws into sharp relief the processes of transmission and adaptation. In particular, it reveals to us that epic development does not rest solely on the various forms of *textual* change such as compilation, expansion, or fragmentation.<sup>4</sup> Oral performance adapts the written texts in *nontextual* ways, which produce even more fundamental change.

### Classical Text and Folk Traditions

Sometime between A.D. 885 and 1185 in the Tanjore area of Tamil-speaking south India, a court poet named Kampan composed a Ramayana of approximately forty thousand lines in Tamil (Zvelebil 1973, 207-17). Kampan's epic, although heavily indebted to the Sanskrit Valmiki Ramayana, is neither a translation nor an imitation of that earlier work. As leading Brahman scholars first declared when they

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3. On Indian oral epics, see the essays in Stuart H. Blackburn et al., eds. (1989); Brenda Beck (1982); and Gene H. Roghair (1982).

4. These models of epic formation are discussed in Jan de Vries (1963, 250-77); Wm. F. Hansen (1978, 14-15); Merle Simmons (1978, 228-32); and John W. Johnson (1982, 121-38).

heard Kampan sing it, and as Indian and Western scholars have reiterated since, it is the finest narrative poem in the two thousand years of Tamil literature.

Yet the history of Kampan's Rama story—its composition, transmission, and performance—is virtually unknown. We may infer from the existence of several versions of the text in palm-leaf manuscripts, before these were conflated into authoritative editions beginning in the 1930s, that the classical epic had circulated through different channels in various parts of south India.<sup>5</sup> It also appears that Kampan's epic influenced the composition of classical Ramayanas in other Dravidian languages, particularly Kannada and Malayalam.<sup>6</sup> Very possibly its popularity is linked to the curious proliferation of Rama temples in the Tanjore area that dates from Kampan's time (Champalaksmi 1981, 273–76). No doubt the epic was recited as liturgy in some of those temples and commented upon in a form of stylized, public discourse in which one or two verses are sung and then elucidated for several hours, a practice that continues even today. The only hard evidence, however, is a fourteenth-century inscription from a temple in Kannada that mentions the recitation of the epic (Meenaksisundaram 1973, 28–29).

In the face of this near total ignorance, it is of extraordinary importance that the Kampan text is still preserved and transmitted in a folk tradition in central Kerala.<sup>7</sup> Throughout Palghat District and contiguous parts of Trichur and Malappuram districts, it is performed as part of a leather shadow puppet play held in local temples of the goddess Bhagavati. The text, accompanied by a voluminous commentary, is recited by a small group of men as a ritual presented for the goddess. The puppet play performances are held overnight (from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m.) and continue for a series of eight nights, twenty-one nights, or even sixty nights.

Yet the history of this folk tradition is as obscure as that of Kampan's epic. Tamil scholars have managed to dig up stray references to a leather puppet play (*tōl-pāva-kūttu*) in old Tamil poetry, but any connection to the present folk tradition in Kerala is speculative

5. The first complete commentary on Kampan was done in 1928; references in this essay are to the Kampan edition with commentary by Ti. K. Cupparaya Cettiyaar (1937).

6. Malayalam Ramayanas influenced by Kampan include *Rāmacaritam* and *Rāma Katha Pāttu*; see K. M. George (1966) and P. K. Narayana Pillai (1970).

7. My field research on the Kerala shadow puppet tradition was conducted for three months in 1984, five months in 1985, and six months in 1989, and was supported by a Senior Fulbright Fellowship of the Council for the International Exchange of Scholars and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

(Arunachalam 1981, 85–105; Ramaswamy 1978, 21–23). Whether the art of shadow puppetry (still practiced in five neighboring states) was found in Kerala before the arrival of Kampan's text or was developed in order to present it, and how either the text or this folk art reached Kerala all remain unanswered questions. Other research on south Indian shadow puppet traditions indicates that this folk art was connected to the movement of Maratha armies to south India in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, since most contemporary performers of the art are Maratha speakers (GoldbergBelle 1984, 185ff.). But the Kerala tradition seems to have followed a different line of development because its performers speak and sing a mixture of Tamil and Malayalam.

Unfortunately, the limited literature on the Kerala folk tradition has done little to clarify how it is connected to Kampan's text. Most research has focused on the puppets (their iconography, production, theatrical role, and so forth), and not on the text sung by the puppeteers.<sup>8</sup> Yet a study of this text reveals a remarkable historical continuity between classical text and contemporary oral performance. The puppet performance follows the classical text very closely.

Not all of Kampan's 10,000 verses are sung in performance. Commonly, the puppeteers sing either 1,400 verses (if the story is begun from the Forest Book) or 825 verses (if begun from the War Book). In the rare instances when the full story is performed, a little more than 2,000 verses are sung. In any form of performance, however, approximately 85 percent of the verses sung are borrowed directly from Kampan (the remainder are discussed later in this paper). Of these, more than half correspond letter-by-letter to the Kampan verse, the only difference being a systematic change from indirect to direct speech. In other verses, the puppeteers might sing a new word or phrase, and only occasionally add an entirely new line.

The verses sung in the folk tradition correspond to the classical text not only in wording, but in sequence as well. To illustrate both, we may compare the shadow puppeteers' version of one episode with the standard Kampan version of the same episode. Choosing the "City Leaving" (*nakar nīṅku paṭalam*) episode as a typical example (see chart 1 below), we find that the puppeteers sing only 39 of the 237 verses in Kampan's text, but that these 39 verses have not been selected at random.<sup>9</sup> Skipping the first two verses in Kampan (which set the

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8. See K. B. Iyer ([1936] 1971, 3–12); M. D. Raghavan (1947); F. Seltmann (1972, 458–90; 1986); and C. Ravindran (1982, 8–20).

9. This particular episode usually covers most of one night's performance.

scene), the folk performers sing the following four in sequence, skip the next verse, sing the following verse, then skip seven in a row, sing the following two (in reverse order), and so forth. Other sections of Kampan's text have been adapted to shadow puppet performance in the same selective fashion.

The general pattern is that the folk tradition tends to omit verses that are descriptive (of persons, places, or mental states) and to select those containing speech or action. The latter verses normally occur in small clusters of two, three, or four verses, which the folk text preserves, skipping the many verses between the clusters. This pattern is followed by all five of the performing troupes I observed. In addition, these troupes show very little variation in either the wording or sequencing of the verses they sing. There is, however, some variation in which verses a particular troupe will sing on a given night. When presenting the *nakar nīṅku paṭalam*, for example, though they do not all sing exactly the same thirty-nine verses, when they do sing the same verse, they do so with the same words and in the same narrative sequence.

This exceptional degree of accuracy in textual transmission and standardization of performance suggests a reliance on written records. Indeed, the particular pattern by which the folk text follows the classical epic leads one to conclude that some person(s) actually sat down with a manuscript of the Kampan epic and deliberately adapted it to the shadow puppet play. While it is true that some troupes do possess palm-leaf manuscripts of the performed verses and some own printed editions of Kampan, more important and common are handwritten (pen on paper) notebooks which are recopied and passed on to young learners. The learners then read and memorize the verses, practice them orally, and then recall them by reference to the first two syllables of the initial line of each verse. Many young singers also write out these syllables on a cardboard sheet for easy reference during the long and exhausting performances that continue night after night. Accuracy of transmission is also ensured by the presence of a senior puppeteer in each troupe who sometimes proves more infallible than any written record.<sup>10</sup> Accurate transmission is also demanded by the ritual function of the shadow puppet performance.

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10. Even if (as often happens) this senior puppeteer is half asleep, a mistaken or garbled line sung by the others will bring him quickly to his feet to correct the error.



## CHART 1

**Folk and Classical Versions  
of the *Nakar Nīnku Paṭalam***

Folk Performance	Kampan Text	Comment
1	3	folk skips first two verses in Kampan
2	4	minor changes in first two lines
3	5	meaning altered by shift in a single word
4	6	verbatim
5	8	minor alteration
6	15	substitution of a single word
7	18	verbatim
8	26	verbatim
9	27	verbatim
10	—	new verse
11	—	new verse
12	32	verbatim
13	33	two words changed
14	44	verbatim
15	45	verbatim
16	48	verbatim
17	49	verbatim (spelling of a single word differs)
18	57	verbatim
19	58	verbatim
20	59	verbatim

Folk Performance	Kampan Text	Comment
21	117	verbatim (folk skips 58 verses)
22	121	verbatim
23	122	verbatim
24	127	verbatim
25	128	verbatim
26	133	verbatim
27	134	verbatim
28	138	new first line
29	150	verbatim
30	151	two words changed
31	165	verbatim
32	166	new last line
33	221	verbatim (folk skips 55 verses)
34	222	verbatim
35	224	verbatim
36	225	verbatim
37	226	verbatim
38	231	verbatim
39	232	verbatim*

\*Verses 233 to 237 are omitted in folk tradition.

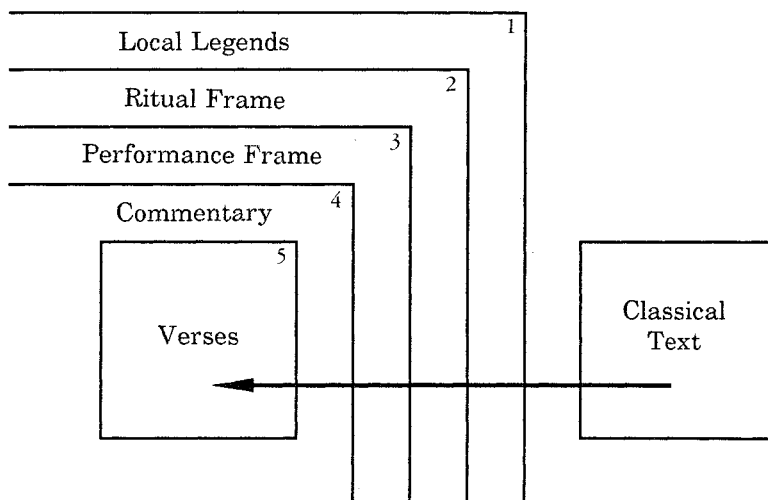
### Adaptation to Folk Context

Textual reproduction is only one of several levels of transmission. Others take place when the reproduced text is performed within a particular context, where transmission also involves adaptation. This adaptation does not necessarily alter the text itself (although that is possible); rather, by simply framing and embedding the preserved text, the new context produces fundamental shifts in meaning. In V. Narayana Rao's terms (see the introduction to this volume), the Kampan text is both recorded (written or recited) and received (actually understood).

Adaptation in the Kerala shadow puppet play occurs in five primary forms, each constituting a layer of the folk tradition, as illustrated in figure 1 below.

**FIGURE 1**

#### Kerala Folk Tradition



As I will attempt to demonstrate, each of these layers acts as an interpretive frame for the transmitted classical epic text, as well as for the other levels of transmission contained within it. Cumulatively, then,

the folk tradition as a whole provides an interpretive framework for the classical epic text that it has absorbed.

The first layer, the extreme outer frame of the folk tradition, consists of the cultural perceptions and expectations of that tradition: of Kampan, his text, the puppeteers, their gurus (*pulavar*), and so forth. The most fundamental of these perceptions are those about Kampan and his text which, in setting forth perspectives on the origins of the tradition, influence all other perspectives. In Kerala, these perceptions are most developed in the series of folk legends about Kampan that enjoy continued popularity in contemporary oral tradition.<sup>11</sup>

The dominant theme in these Kampan legends is the classical poet as a "man of the common people." In part, this portrayal stems from the fact that Kampan composed in Tamil rather than Sanskrit (known only through special training and often restricted to Brahmans), and also because his poetic style and language are relatively accessible. The folk tradition adds its own tales about Kampan as well, whereby Kampan's image as a man of the common people is confirmed by reference not only to local village residents but also to divine authority. Perhaps the best known legend describes Kampan's defense of his composition by appeal to colloquial speech (see appendix). In this episode, when Kampan's use of a particular word is questioned by a fellow poet, Kampan leads his rival and a party of kings and patrons to a village where, with some magical assistance from a goddess, he shows them a woman who uses the disputed word.

Kampan's image as champion of the common people is found in other folk legends as well. For example, in one story a woodcutter (and would-be poet) enters the assembly of court poets and begins to recite. When the other poets scoff at his incoherent mutterings (and in Tamil they are complete nonsense), Kampan steps forward and explains how each phrase can be construed as metrical verse, thereby both vindicating the woodcutter and displaying his own prosodic skill. Elsewhere Kampan is variously depicted as a gallant lover of many women, a cook, and a friend to a barber (a near-untouchable caste). In yet another story, he plays the role of a folk healer who uses his own verses as a charm to revive a child killed by a snakebite.

All this stands in contrast to the portrait of Kampan developed in classical sources and scholarship, where he is seen as a "saint" (*ālvār*, lit. "deep-one") and a devotee of Visnu and his incarnation (*avatāra*) Rama. His poem is certified not by the common speech of village

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11. Some of these legends are discussed in Cu. Turaicuvami Pillai (1949); and Me. Vi. Venukopala Pillai (1953).

women, but by rigorous examination from Brahman scholars in wealthy temples.<sup>12</sup> In developing their image of Kampan, the folk legends represent the essential role of the adaptive process: they do not actually change the original identity of Kampan as a classical poet (for this would rob the folk tradition of prestige), but only enlarge upon it, presenting him as more than a poet, as a person and a personality.

Another group of legends enlarges on the image of Kampan in the opposite direction, by presenting the poet as a form of the god Shiva and, at the same time, inserting the classical poet and his composition directly into the local context. In one version the goddess Lakshmi, then guardian of the treasury of the gods, becomes haughty and is cursed to be reborn as a guard in the palace of Ravana, where she spends many years. When Rama's army approaches, she tries to prevent the entrance of Rama's monkey ally, Hanuman, who slaps her with his powerful tail and brings her spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*) in Shiva's heaven. On arriving there, however, she complains to Shiva: "I spent so many years in Ravana's palace and now will miss the chance to see that demon killed by Rama." Shiva replies that he will grant her a vision of Ravana's death, and not just once but repeatedly. Thus is she reborn as the goddess Bhagavati, and Shiva takes birth as Kampan, who then writes the epic of Rama that is now enacted for her every year in her temples.

A second and equally popular variant of this legend provides another reason for the goddess' absence at the original death of Ravana: she herself was away killing another demon (Mahishasura). She then appeals to Shiva, who grants her the boon described in the first version. Also, in both variants, Shiva is then born to a childless woman who had practiced bodily austerities in a temple. However, because her husband is away at the birth, she abandons the child to avoid scandal; the child is found in the temple courtyard at the base of a pole (*kampu*), from which he is given the name "Kampan." Kampan then composes his Ramayana, which is later performed as a shadow puppet play for the goddess Bhagavati, again so that she can finally witness and rejoice in the death of Ravana. Moreover, this is precisely how Kampan's story of Rama is performed in Kerala today: as a form of worship to Bhagavati who watches the spectacle from inside her temple.

It is this performance context and its ritual frame that constitute the second level of adaptation. Here the classical text is presented in a

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12. The "orthodox" biography of Kampan can be found in several sources; see, for example, A. K. Naidu (1963).

particular fashion: the transformations are not narrative, but performative. At present, the shadow puppet play is enacted in at least one hundred Bhagavati temples in central Kerala as part of a local annual festival. At each site a special building (*kūttu māṭam*) has been constructed for the performance; it is set apart from the main temple complex, but linked to it by a series of rituals conducted on each of the several nights of performance.

About ten o'clock each night, following a number of other rituals a flame is brought from the temple's central oil lamp to the puppet stage by a procession of officials, patrons, and singers. At the puppet stage it is used to light the many smaller lamps inside the building whose flames cast the puppets' shadows on a white cloth that hangs from the roof and separates the puppeteers inside the building from the audience outside. After the goddess (in the form of her medium) blesses the performance, the small crowd of onlookers disperses and the play proper begins. From that point (around ten o'clock) until five o'clock sharp the following morning, the puppeteers manipulate the leather puppets, sing the Kampan verses, and comment on them. During these hours, the only audience is Bhagavati herself, who sits at a small distance inside her temple.<sup>13</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the shadow puppet play may begin at two or three different points in the Rama story, depending on how many nights it is to continue in a particular temple (which in turn depends on the extent of local patronage). However, the play always concludes with the same event, as requested by the goddess: the death of Ravana and the coronation of Rama. Here, again, the classical text has not been altered, for this is the conclusion of Kampan's epic, too. But these events are not just story; they are the ritual culmination of several weeks of a temple festival. In thus transforming a classical epic into a ritual instrument, the folk tradition produces more far-reaching changes than it would by narrative alterations. The linear endpoint of a narrative becomes the centerpoint of a ritual experience.

This ritual function of the shadow puppet play also affects the frame for the narrative, the third level of adaptation. This narrative frame consists of two parts, placed at either end of the performance; each is intended to win the favor of the goddess and is approximately one hour in length. The first part of the frame is a long series of verses

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13. The curious fact that throughout the long night performances there is no human audience (save at a few temple sites where the festival has become a fair that keeps a crowd all night) illustrates an extreme example of performance as ritual act.

sung at the opening of a night's performance; the second part, the closure of each performance, is a repetition of a single verse for each person who has contributed a few rupees to the performance. Here we will consider only the first part of this narrative frame.

The introductory verses begin with two praise-poems to Ganapati, the elephant-faced god and remover of obstacles. These are followed by several others to various gods and goddesses (including the particular form of Bhagavati in the temple), a verse thanking sponsors of the night's performance (who contribute hundreds of rupees), and finally a prose segment that recapitulates the previous action as background to the episodes sung that night. Following directly on the prose summary is the narrative itself, which begins when the puppeteers first sing and then comment upon each of the performed verses in a pattern that will continue without interruption until the next morning.

Within this introductory string of verses are several examples of performative adaptation. Two seem significant: who sings the verses and what verses are sung. The first concerns the identity of the singers; although the puppeteers who actually sing the verses are non-Brahmans, the puppets on the screen presented as singing them are Brahmans. Fixed in the center of the screen is a puppet of Ganapati, flanked by two Brahman puppets singing the introductory verses as part of a ritual conducted to him. In this way, the larger ritual frame of the temple festival (level two) is recreated on a smaller scale within the actual performance of the Rama story. Even more importantly, this framing voice gives the puppet performance a status it would not otherwise enjoy. While performances are a central ritual in all temple festivals, the tradition itself has a relatively low status; its singers and patrons are from middle-level castes and the puppet stage itself is carefully set outside the temple compound. By contrast, other performing arts are enacted within the temple and controlled by Brahmans and other high castes.

In other words, the folk tradition compensates for its low status by reintroducing the Brahmanical sanction of Kampan's original text that has been lost in the hands and mouths of the lower-caste puppeteers. The legitimizing Brahmans are "puppets" who confer status within the stage itself, that portion of the total tradition over which the puppeteers have most control. Again, adaptation is interpretive rather than substantive. More consequential than altering the text is controlling the identity of those who present it.

The other adaptation in the introductory verses that frame the performance concerns not who speaks, but what is said. Many of the prefatory verses invoking deities are drawn from oral tradition and not

from Kampan; by naming various local gods and goddesses, such verses fix the performance firmly in the local context. An even more subtle effect, however, is achieved by a verse that is borrowed from the classical epic. The following verse, taken from Kampan, is an important instance of how the written text is used to legitimize folk performance.

There is wealth, wisdom, fame,  
 Lakshmi's lotus smile,  
 even a path to salvation  
 For those who tell of Rama's strong shoulders,  
 when he destroyed the great demon armies  
 and wore the *vākai* victory flower.

This verse is typical of a convention common to most traditional literature in India and known in Tamil as “benefit [gained from] the text” (*nūl payaṅ*). It is used in both Kampan and the shadow puppet performance with the same intention, in the same introductory position, and with precisely the same wording. Even the oral commentary given by the puppeteers agrees with the classical commentary in its essential points.

Yet this accurate transmission of the classical text does not preclude its adaptation in extra-textual forms. Although the verse is borrowed verbatim from Kampan, here it is given special attention. Because it is sung in the introduction to every performance, it is performed more frequently than any other verse borrowed from Kampan. It is also the first verse learned by a student and it is often placed at the head of the palm-leaf and handwritten manuscripts used by the puppeteers. Some written folk texts even use it as a heading for each division in the narrative. Moreover, during performance it is delivered in an unusual style, with all the performers joining together to sing in a high pitch, followed by a long, dramatic pause before they move on to the next verse.

In short, this verse has become an epigram for the total tradition. It tells the essence of the story—that Rama kills Ravana (and wore the *vākai* flower)—and carries the promise that those who tell (and listen) to it will achieve life's goals. The verse does this in the classical text as well, but the folk tradition develops it performatively, by repetition, by vocal style, and by emphasis. Through these means, the verse functions as a condensed commentary upon the text from which it was taken.

An amusing hermeneutical twist in the relation between commentary and text occurs later in the shadow puppet play when Rama is



exiled to the forest. Sadly he turns to his wife, Sita, and tells her that he must leave her for fourteen years; but she refuses to be left behind and argues that she must accompany him. Rama says no, the hardships of the forest will be too great. The argument is finally broken when Sita says, "But of course I will go with you—is there any Ramayana in which Sita does not accompany Rama to the forest?"<sup>14</sup> Here the text upon which the folk tradition comments is the total tradition of Rama stories, including itself. The Kerala tradition calls attention to itself as a variant of the Rama story, with the ironic intention of maintaining narrative uniformity.

This kind of reflexivity is especially common in the oral commentary, the fourth level of adaptation in the folk tradition. The commentary, which follows each verse, takes two forms: (1) a line-by-line gloss in formal prose, which leads (sometimes) into (2) a more informal and extended discussion incorporating parables, folk tales, and comment on cosmology, architecture, medicine, and so on. This complicated commentary, which accounts for the long nights of performance, is entirely oral and independent of the written transmission of the classical text that it interprets. Its commentarial function is the essence of the relationship between folk tradition and classical text: it maintains but interprets the text for the local audience (see the appendix for an example of this commentarial role).

On each of the four levels considered thus far, we have seen that the folk Ramayana tradition in Kerala adapts Kampan's epic without altering the text. On the fifth level of the embedded text, however, adaptation is necessarily textual. As pointed out earlier, verses borrowed from Kampan are changed to suit the puppet play by a systematic shift from indirect to direct speech and by minor substitutions of words and phrases. A more substantial textual alteration is represented by the 15 percent of the sung verses that are not borrowed from Kampan but have been added to his text by the folk tradition.

Although the number of these added verses (perhaps 150 to 200) is small, the incidents they narrate are not insignificant. In Kerala perhaps the most important of these incidents is the killing of Sambukumaran (son of Shurpanaka, who is Ravana's sister) by Lakshmana (Rama's brother). This event is unknown in Kampan (in any version) or in Valmiki, in which Shurpanaka has no son. In the Kerala folk epic, when Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita arrive in the forest, Sambukumaran is already deep in meditation in a tree, the same tree

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14. This humorous twist is found also in folk Ramayanas in Kannada (A. K. Ramanujan, personal communication, 1985).

that Lakshmana soon chops down, accidentally killing Sambukumaran. The verse ends with Lakshmana expressing his fear: "What evil consequences will arise from this act I do not know." Indeed, the remainder of the epic story enacts those consequences: Shurpanaka finds her dead son, vows revenge, and later entices her brother Ravana to steal Sita, an act that forces Rama to war against the demon king.

The killing of Sambukumaran is described by the puppeteers in eight verses, none of which appear in Kampan. Yet it would be wrong to conclude that this incident is the particular innovation of Kerala folk tradition, for it is found also in other folk and literary Ramayanas in India and Southeast Asia.<sup>15</sup> The actual wording of the verses (which is virtually indistinguishable from Kampan's art) might well be the work of a folk poet or even a learned puppeteer from Kerala, but is more likely borrowed (like the rest of the text) from a literary source. Thus even in this textual realm the principle of adaptation is the same: adaptation is primarily additive and interpretive. The folk tradition does not replace episodes in the classical text with episodes of its own; instead it adds interpretive frames to the received text by incorporating new verses. The Sambukumaran episode, for example, supplies yet another level of motivation (Shurpanaka's revenge) to the already complicated plot.

In conclusion, the shadow puppet performance of Kampan's text reveals new aspects of the relation between written text and oral performance. Whereas most studies of text and performance have examined the effects of writing on performance, the Kerala tradition illustrates the reverse process: how oral performance changes a written text. The shadow puppet tradition also demonstrates that writing and orality are not only compatible, but mutually dependent. Oral performance in this case does not replace the written text; it adapts it. That adaptation, as we have seen, occurs primarily on five levels, and only on the last does it involve narrative alteration.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, adaptation is interpretive; it frames and orients the text, but does not

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15. The killing of Shurpanaka's son is found in several folk Ramayanas in Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada, and in the more literary *Ananda Ramayana* (Sanskrit), *Paumacariyam* (Prakrit), *Ramakien* (Thai), and *Hikayat Seri Rama* (Malay). On this episode in the Kerala tradition, see also Pe. Na. Appucami (1942, 161-65).

16. Although the notion of adaptation runs counter to presuppositions (in both Western and Indian scholarship) of unified composition and unitary authorship in classical epics, these texts do have a history. For example, however deeply Kampan's text is felt to be the creation of the court poet, it is as much an adaptation (of preexisting Rama stories in Tamil) as are the folk Ramayanas (like the Kerala tradition) which adapt it. These Rama stories in Tamil are discussed in M. Rakava Aiyankar (1964, 16-51); and A. Pandurangan (1982, 58-67).

substitute for it. This maintenance of textual stability over centuries of oral performance challenges our expectations of variation in oral and folk tradition, and also suggests that the creativity of the folk epic lies in extra-textual spheres.

### Appendix

The following translation of a commentary to a single verse from a shadow puppet performance (held in March 1985 in Puttur) presents one version of a legend about Kampan. The excerpt picks up the story when Rama and his monkey army have reached the shore of the ocean that separates them from Lanka where Ravana holds Sita captive. Unable to cross the water, Rama forces Varuna (god of oceans) to appear; Varuna tells Rama to build a bridge by throwing stones and boulders into his water.

The performer begins by singing the following verse:

Kumutan threw a mountain into the sea,  
 whose roaring, frothy water  
 Reached the heavens where the gods danced,  
 thinking the ambrosia had risen again.

*Commentary:* "This is a verse that carries many meanings. It is said that it was the very first verse that Kampan wrote and that he wrote it to make a point. It also contains the story of how that point was demonstrated to the court poets. So much history lies behind this single verse, but we can begin with what we all know: that the earth was ruled by the Chola, Pandyan, and Chera kings. The Chola kings ruled over the region of Tanjore, and each king kept sixty-four learned men, thirty-two poets, and thirty-two scholars. At that time in Tanjore there also lived a great man named Cataiyappan who had the reputation of helping everyone who brought their troubles to him. He offered them support and so was given the title *vallal*, or 'Great Benefactor.'

"This generous Cataiyappan was also a close friend of the Chola Raja and would often visit his court. One day he spoke to his friend, 'O, raja, you have sixty-four poets and scholars in your court, but we have no Rama story in the southern language, in Tamil. It's only in the northern language, in the Sanskrit written by Valmiki with many, many meanings condensed in each line. If it were in Tamil, all of us

could follow it and enjoy the benefit that comes from understanding that great story. Therefore, summon your best poets—Ottakuttan and Kampan—and order them to compose a Ramayana in the southern language.’ The raja called the poets, made the request, and they agreed.

“From that day, Ottakuttan began to write. He finished the Birth Book, Ayodhya Book, Forest Book, Beautiful Book, and came to the beginning of the War Book when Sri Rama, Lakshmana, and the monkey army travelled for twelve days and reached the edge of the salt ocean. When Ottakuttan told the raja he had completed this much, Kampan was embarrassed: ‘I’ve not yet written a single verse. But if I admit it, the name of Kampan, which is praised everywhere as a great poet, will become inferior to that of Ottakuttan. Certainly there are books which admonish us not to lie, but there are other books which say we can lie. How do we know when to lie and when not to? Well, if we do lie, the most important thing is that it should not cause any trouble or evil. If you lie in order to accomplish a good deed, then it’s not wrong; in fact, it ceases to be a lie and becomes the truth. The *sastra* rule books say you can tell not just one lie, but two, three, a hundred, even hundreds of lies, and all at the same time. There is that verse:

Getting a woman married, or a spy spying,  
 Creating good, or teaching the three essences,  
 Or saving an innocent man from death—  
 At these times, a hundred lies may be told.

“This is what philosophy teaches us. In order to get a woman married and give her a good life, you have to tell a hundred lies. Those lies become the truth; if you don’t tell lies, how can you arrange a marriage? Or to create a good thing, to avoid evil, you may tell a hundred lies. Likewise, if a cruel person goes to kill an innocent man, we may tell lies to save him. At times like these, lies act like truths.’

“Now Kampan thought about this and said to himself, ‘The lie I’m going to tell won’t have any evil consequences.’ So he looked at the raja and said, ‘I have written up to the point when Rama comes to the ocean, is unable to cross, does meditation, fires arrows at Varuna [the sea-god], waits for Varuna to appear, and then strings the Brahma-weapon. Varuna then places a garland on Rama, worships him and asks forgiveness, and then tells Rama that to cross to Lanka he may build a bridge by throwing rocks into his ocean. Then,’

Kumutan threw a mountain into the sea,  
 whose roaring, frothy water  
 Reached the heavens where the gods danced,  
 thinking the ambrosia had risen again.

“When Kampan told the raja he had written that verse, he lied and Ottakuttan knew it. He had seen him wandering about and knew he hadn’t written a single verse. He also saw that some of the wording was ungrammatical and so, hoping to expose Kampan’s lie, Ottakuttan challenged him: ‘Kampan, your verse may sound fine, but look at the line about the gods dancing when the water (*tumi*) reached the heavens. I ask you: is the use of *tumi* grammatical? Does it have any basis in common speech?’

“Kampan had to stop and think because at that time the word *tumi* was not used. And even if it were grammatical, that would not be enough; it must be used by common people. So Ottakuttan continued, ‘No one speaks the word *tumi*; if it were common speech, lots of people would use it, wouldn’t they? You must prove to me that they do.’ Kampan simply answered, ‘All right; I’ll prove it tomorrow.’

“Without taking any food, he went straight to the temple of Ampikai and called to her, ‘Goddess, with your blessings I am a poet sitting in the raja’s court; he ordered us to compose a Tamil Ramayana and I told a lie about a verse with the word *tumi* in it. Now the other poets have challenged me to prove it’s used in common speech. Of course, if you don’t want to help, it’s no loss to me.’ With this plea, he fell into a half sleep. Then Ampikai appeared and spoke: ‘Kampan, why worry like this? Tomorrow morning, before the night has gone, bring them all to the shepherds’ lane and I will prove to their ears that the word is used.’ Suddenly she vanished and Kampan felt relieved.

“Early the next morning, he finished his duties and went quickly to the raja who greeted him, ‘Well, Kampan, can you show us the word *tumi* today?’ ‘I can,’ he replied, ‘but we must go now before the light. Come along, all of you.’ The raja, Ottakuttan, Cataiyappan, the ministers, and other poets had stayed awake and were ready. Off they went to the shepherds’ lane where they saw two lines of houses. They looked on both sides, but nowhere was there an open door or a burning lamp. Going ahead, they looked carefully and then, at the very end, saw a single house with a light. Inside was a woman surrounded by four children. She was churning curds and shouted to the children, ‘Get back, the *tumi* will fall on you; watch out for the *tumi*.’

“The raja, poets, and ministers were amazed. Why, among all these houses with no one awake and no light, does this single house

have a lamp? Who is that woman? And who are the children? They ran forward to find out, but when they reached the spot, there was no house, no children, no woman, no lamp—only a deserted place! They stopped for a minute and then cried out, ‘This is the work of Ampikai; it can be nothing else. And Kampan has her powers, so we can’t debate with him about poetry. What goddess or god can we summon to prove our point?’ And so they all returned to the palace.

“Then Kampan began to write. With the help of the best Tamil scholars and Sanskrit pandits, he composed 700 verses between sunrise and sunset every day. In the evening he would go to Ampikai’s temple and worship her, placing his manuscript near the shrine. After his rituals, he would look again at it and all the errors would have been corrected. This is how Kampan wrote his Ramayana in 12,116 verses and six chapters.”

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## PALM LEAF AND PERFORMANCE

### The Epics in Balinese Theater

Mary S. Zurbuchen

The vitality of the Mahabharata and Ramayana epic traditions is unquestionable and unquestioned in Bali. These originally Indian epics thrive not only in a variety of theater forms but also in numerous written versions. Such vitality may, indeed, seem strange when one considers that the days of direct contact between Balinese and Indian civilizations are part of a remote, unclear protohistorical past. The epics may have been integral to Balinese theater—itsself an important component of communal ritual—since the early centuries A.D.

There is no known evidence to prove just how early the epics themselves were known in Bali. The oldest literary work we have in Javanese is a poetic version of the Ramayana dating from the late ninth century. Moreover, even though the manuscript originated in Java, it was preserved (along with most surviving Old Javanese literature) only in Bali.<sup>1</sup> The origins of Balinese theater remain equally obscure. The earliest reference we have is an inscription in Old Balinese from the eighth century which mentions *wayang* performance.<sup>2</sup> Sixteenth-century texts refer to a kind of *wayang* (shadow puppet theater) performance called *wayang prawa* or *wayang parwa*, using the term for the divisions or books (*parwa*) of the Sanskrit Mahabharata, and thereby confirming the integration of performance and epic traditions. Despite this incomplete literary record, however, other evidence suggests that this integration occurred much earlier. Based on

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1. See P. J. Zoetmulder (1974, 36-43) for a description of how the literary heritage was shaped and preserved by the Balinese, to whom "we owe a debt of gratitude for the conservation of this literature."

2. This charter is found as #002 in Roelof Goris (1954).

the available facts, it is possible to hypothesize that the two great epics became associated with Balinese theater and ritual even before the period of close political ties with Java in the eleventh century. It seems clear that both the performing arts and written texts, primarily the prose *parwa* versions and the poetic *kakawin*, were channels through which these originally Indian epics were acculturated by the Balinese.

In this essay I examine three contemporary dramatic genres portraying Mahabharata stories and analyze the ways in which each genre intersects with the textual epic forms in Bali.<sup>3</sup> These genres are the shadow theater and two dance-drama forms, one of which can be considered typically "classical" and the other essentially "modern." I also explain how drama uses language to present images of the epic and society, and how these patterns of verbal art are being altered.

### Shadow Theater

*Wayang parwa* is still the Balinese term used to refer to shadow puppet theater portraying Mahabharata stories.<sup>4</sup> The epic repertoire focuses on the Pandawa-Korawa struggle with its four classes of characters: *dewa*, *ratu*, *resi*, and *raksasa* (gods, nobles, priests, and demons).<sup>5</sup> They are given voices by the shadow master (*dalang*), who puts in their mouths a form of the archaic and literary language called Kawi, or Old Javanese. Another group, the common-class attendants (often called clowns) are the loyal companions and commentators for their high-born masters. Called *panasar* (base figures), they speak in contemporary Balinese. Indeed, theater, texts, and oral literary performance are all linked in a cycle of mutual influence in terms of story material, narrative structure, and vocal acoustic features. The use of two languages in *wayang parwa* performance has affected the way the epics have been preserved and studied in Bali since ancient times. The

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3. While much of the information on which this paper is based was gathered in Bali in 1977-1979 while under a Social Science Research Council doctoral research fellowship, I have greatly benefitted since that time from talks with a number of Balinese artists and teachers. Thanks go to Dr. Made Bandem, Wayan Dibia, Wayan Wija, Nyoman Rajeg, Drs. Wayan Warna, Dr. Andrew Toth, and Rachel Cooper. Any mistakes or inadequacies are entirely mine.

4. For detailed discussions of Balinese shadow theater see Christiaan Hooykaas 1973, H. I. R. Hinzler 1981, Colin McPhee [1936] 1970, and Mary S. Zurbuchen 1987.

5. The five Pandawa brothers and their one hundred cousins, the Korawas, were raised together as heirs of the Bharata clan, but fell out over the issue of division of the kingdom of Astinapura. Their increasingly hostile rivalry, culminating in a devastating war (the Bharatayuddha), portrays the world-view and choices of *satria* (noble) classes.

major medium of written literary transmission has been the *lontar*, or palm-leaf manuscript. The *lontar* plays a central role in *wayang* and other traditional performance genres, particularly as a model for integrating the textual and oral traditions.

The Balinese continue to be fond of reading from *lontars* in group performances called *pepaosan* or *mabasan*, in which a singer will read from the manuscript text and a translator will paraphrase the original into appropriate modern Balinese. This is done line by line, or phrase by phrase, and the entire performance creates a text that combines old with modern language, song with speech, and manuscript literacy with some aspects of oral tradition. Opportunity is also given for questioning and discussion of the literary text being performed, thus contributing further to the complete translation of the ancient text into contemporary terms. For many genres of verbal art, the *lontar* is a record not so much of unvoiced language to be read in silence, but rather of vocal music with its own poetics and particular sounds. In other words, most *lontars* are only the visual part of the text. In performance it is the reader and singer of the text who provide the musical voice, and the translator who provides interpretation.

Literary performance mirrors the way shadow masters perform stories from the two great epics. In shadow theater, the *dalang* follows each speech by a noble character—rendered in the archaic literary language—with a paraphrase in Balinese spoken by the clowns. *Dalangs* are supposed to have intimate knowledge of the manuscript versions of the epics, and this is ideally the source of their ability to compose Kawi dialogue in performance. While not all performers are *literati*, the great majority are literate and many have, at least during their apprenticeship, studied the *lontars*.<sup>6</sup>

The *dalang* also depends on literary sources for the songs and other vocal embellishments necessary to *wayang* performance. In sung fragments and quotations variously called *bebaturan*, *tetandakan*, or *sesendon*, the *dalang* evokes the literary and aesthetic source for the play: the revered ancient texts. For example, during a scene of sadness or nostalgic longing, Arjuna's grief-stricken state of mind is illustrated using a quotation from the *kakawin Bharatayuddha*, as follows:

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6. The epics are found in a variety of textual forms in Bali. In addition to the *kakawin* and *parwa* manuscripts, there are more recent poetic recensions of various episodes from the epics called *kidung*, *peparikan*, and so forth. There are also prose summaries of tales used by theater performers in texts known as *ketakaparwa*.

*Mulat mara sang Arjunasemu kamanusan kasrepan.*  
 ("As he gazed, Arjuna appeared to be touched with pity.")<sup>7</sup>

No *wayang* would be complete without "quotations" from the great poems and stories handed down in *lontar* form. Embellishments are the voice of the past brought alive in the present, providing a textual authority and material substance more permanent than the lamplit puppet shadows flickering on the screen.

My claim that the written form of the epics has had important influences on the language of *wayang* and its verbal structure is reinforced by several other features of the literary landscape. For example, we can look at the Old Javanese *parwa* texts, prose works written during the eleventh century.<sup>8</sup> Their structure is marked by the presence of Sanskrit phrases interspersed at irregular intervals, with each full or fragmentary Sanskrit *sloka* (verse) being followed by a Javanese rendering. It may be that this textual form is related to an earlier epic recitation style. Present-day performance of *wayang* and other forms of traditional theater reflect this dual-language structure of the older textual tradition.

Another link between *wayang* and earlier literary styles is provided by the tradition of *amrakerta*, which refers to storytelling and, more specifically, to making vernacular glosses of excerpts from written texts.<sup>9</sup> We know from sixteenth-century literature that shadow theater was performed using this technique, which bears striking similarities to modern oral performance as well.<sup>10</sup>

If patterns of language in the *lontars* have indeed influenced the verbal structure of oral performance in Balinese theater, then manuscripts must also be recognized as major sources of story content. In the shadow puppet plays, the plot or outline of a particular story is termed *lampahan*. A *lampahan* may be a traditional plot known to everyone, or it may be a more recent creation by a performer drawing on epic material while creating a new story. The distinction between the core or "trunk" of the epic and its later accretions or "branches" is a

7. Canto X, verse 12, cited in Sutjipto Wirjosuparto (1968, 75).

8. There are only eight (of a total of eighteen) *parwas* that have survived in Old Javanese versions: the *Adiparwa*, *Wirataparwa*, *Udyogaparwa*, *Bhismaparwa*, *Asramawasaparwa*, *Mosalaparwa*, *Prasthanikaparwa*, and *Swargarohanaparwa*. The last four of these may have been composed later than the first four, which were likely written during the reign of the Javanese king Dharmawangsa.

9. See the citations provided by Zoetmulder (1982, 1389).

10. An interesting insight into this practice appears in the text called *Wangbang Wideya* (see Robson 1971).

feature of the Balinese *wayang* repertoire just as it is in other shadow theater traditions in Southeast Asia. Performers rely not only on palm-leaf manuscripts for their research into story content; modern transliterated and published versions of the epics are often consulted, and story summaries or comic-book forms of the epics are readily used.

While my own research has focused on the *wayang parwa*, which is based on the Mahabharata, it should be noted that *wayang parwa* is similar to shadow plays portraying Ramayana stories. The former, however, is more widespread and popular. Performers say they prefer *wayang parwa* because it has "more stories" than *wayang* Ramayana; that is, it has a larger epic trunk upon which multitudes of intertwining branches can be grafted.

More generally, the manuscript tradition as a whole has apparently acted as a constraint on the creation of new stories by individual performers, since any new episodes must fit within the "historical" framework provided by written versions of the Mahabharata. Although performers are usually free to choose or even to make up the story to be played, when asked to perform a particular "trunk" story they are faced with the special challenge of portraying a fixed text.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the traditional courts of the past would often request performances of well-known episodes from the core epic, both as a test of the performer's skill and as a means to judge the validity of his interpretation. Even today an individual commissioning a performance may request a certain *pokok* (trunk) story and, in response to these requests (*ngwidi lampahan*), *dalangs* may consult the *lontars* in preparation for their oral performance. It is clear that their use of written epic has kept the form of *wayang* language and story content fairly close to the manuscript versions.

### ***Parwa* Dance-drama**

Another performance genre that continues to use Mahabharata stories is *parwa* dance-drama, which combines Mahabharata stories with human actors and dancers. Although *parwa* is performed only infrequently today, in its heyday its dancing, singing, and characterizations by masked players made it a popular form of entertainment. *Parwa* is similar to Balinese *wayang wong*, which depicts Ramayana

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11. Many factors go into the *dalang's* decision to perform a *lampahan* from his repertoire or to compose a new tale. Stories newly composed by *dalangs* are referred to as *kawi dalang* plots.

stories, and musical accompaniment is provided by the same gamelan ensemble, the *batel gender wayang*. Today very few performers can recreate its complicated traditional staging.<sup>12</sup>

The relationships between *parwa* dance-drama and the epic tradition in manuscript form are in many ways similar to those found in shadow theater. The use of plots or quotations from the texts takes place within a dramatic structure which demands spontaneity and improvisation as well as adherence to tradition. As in *wayang*, the noble characters use Kawi language, with the clown-servants speaking in Balinese and providing interpretations linking the story to contemporary Balinese life. Instead of a single performer rendering voices for all the puppet characters (the *dalang* in shadow theater), we find a company of actors each representing a stock dramatic type.

Typically such a troupe will have one or two seasoned professionals who are likely to be familiar with written epic texts. They are normally responsible for selecting the *lampahan* to be performed and for consulting a manuscript for choice poetic excerpts. Such persons also take primary responsibility for musical accompaniment, breaking the story into appropriate dramatic segments, and coaching dance movement. Members of the cast do not, however, take their speeches directly from a prepared script or even from a manuscript version of the story. Instead they use special dramatic styles, composed of formulaic expressions, set speeches, and familiar songs, all of which could appear in other performances of the same genre. In common with other dance-drama forms, *parwa* is enjoyed for its singing, and performances are judged both in terms of the selection of vocal music and the style and delivery of the singing actors. In contrast, the *dalang* of the puppet theater uses more spoken dialogue than singing, and his verbal artistry depends more heavily on intricate argument and complex allusion.

Both *wayang parwa* and *parwa* dance-drama are quintessentially "traditional" forms in Bali. By "traditional" I do not refer to art that is static, archaic, preserved in archives, and resonant with protean cultural roots. Shadow theater in particular is lively and fluid; it is not performed out of nostalgia for the past. However, both shadow theater and *parwa* derive much of their meaning from the contexts of their

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12. In 1985-1986 the Indonesian College of the Arts (Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia, STSI) conducted a study of existing *parwa* troupes in Blahkiuh, Tunjuk, Sukawati, and Denpasar. Four dance-dramas were videotaped and transcribed, and information was gathered on the stories, dance, music, and background of the performers.

performance—the temple rituals or life-cycle ceremonies that occasion them. Thus, their audiences are communities which have come together for a specific occasion honoring the past of clan ancestors, old kingdoms, or village founders. As theater these genres have inseparable links to the experience of communal ritual.

One of the primary characteristics of traditional oral performance of epic stories is its reference to the concerns and identity of the local community. One of the major challenges to dramatic performers is to simultaneously tell tales that are “true” to the conventions of the epic while making indirect allusion to contemporary issues. The genius of great performances is apparent here, where an archaic, conservative form is made to serve as a contemporary and local frame of reference. The excerpt below, from the written introduction of a synopsis of a *parwa* story performed in the mid-1980s, shows an ideal blending of these referential elements.

The success of the Five Pandawas in building their new palace in Amarta was brought about by the efforts and hard work of all segments of society. Their achievement was all the more outstanding, coming as it did after they had escaped the deathtrap of the burning house, followed by their triumph in winning Draupadi through Arjuna’s victory in the martial competition at Pancala.

Amarta developed as a new state, firm and strong and renowned throughout the world. The security of the state was based on the skill with which Yudistira divided responsibilities among his siblings. Yudistira himself instructed the populace in the teachings of dharma. Bima of the sturdy physique brought together martial warriors to strengthen the territorial defense of the state. Arjuna was assigned to the field of the arts, Nakula to the field of literature, and Sadewa to the field of health, while Draupadi provided upgrading in women’s affairs.<sup>13</sup>

The particular plot (in this case an abduction of Draupadi brought about by Duryodana’s relentless determination to destroy the Pandawas, with complications due to Bima’s great temper and over-

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13. The story itself, performed by a group of Sukawati artists, is entitled “Prajā Winangun” [The development of the realm]. The Five Pandawas are the heroic brothers who oppose their Korawa kinsmen in the Mahabharata.



hasty reactions) is first placed within the fixed epic framework of the Mahabharata texts through reference to two key episodes: the burning of a house in which the Pandawas were sleeping, and the *swayembara* (martial competition) held for Draupadi's hand. At the same time, the story is given a modern national setting, mirroring the preoccupations of development-conscious Indonesia. These concerns, blended in the contemporary oral performance of epic episodes, are ones which persist not only in such dance-dramas as *parwa*, but which characterize traditional theater genres in Bali as a whole.

It is these same concerns which link and identify what I call traditional or classical Balinese theater. In contrast, what I call "modern" theater reflects very different contexts of performance, where communal ritual is not a major feature, and where patterns of reference to both epic sources and social contexts have changed. This brings us to the third major dramatic form using stories from the Mahabharata, namely *sendratari*, and to a consideration of the notable changes underway in Balinese performing arts.

### *Sendratari*

The name of this genre itself suggests modernism and national awareness; it is an Indonesian acronym of *seni drama tari* (art-drama-dance). The form made its official debut in the early 1960s at a dance festival held at Prambanan in central Java. Initially *sendratari* featured a simplified version of the main plot of the Ramayana and was played in a public arena on a regular schedule. It seems to have been conceived both as an expression of Indonesian "national" culture and as something potentially appealing to tourist audiences. Over time the Mahabharata has replaced the Ramayana as the main source of dramatic material and the genre itself has proven to be an exceptionally popular form of entertainment for the Balinese.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, *sendratari* has emerged as a major form of contemporary Balinese theater of rather remarkable scale. It is frequently seen on a stage rather than in the open arena of the temple courtyard, street, or village pavilion of traditional theater. As stage-drama it utilizes such elaborate technical apparatus as lighting, sound systems, sets, and props. One of the largest sites of *sendratari* performance, the Werdi

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14. Actually, a number of nonepic legends have also been staged as *sendratari* productions. See I Made Bandem (1983, 131-33) for the relevant Balinese background of this theater form.

Budaya Art Center in Denpasar, possesses an enormous stage and the technical facilities for mounting productions involving more than one hundred dancers.

The "colossal" scale of *sendratari* staging, and the size of the budget needed for its large cast, elaborate costumes, and sets and props makes it a difficult undertaking for village arts groups working with limited resources. The major *sendratari*s of Bali are staged by the two government performing arts institutes in Denpasar, known as the Indonesian College of the Arts (Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia, STSI) and the Indonesian School of Music (Sekolah Menengah Karawitan Indonesia, SMKI). During the annual month-long, government-sponsored arts festival held at Werdi Budaya, several *sendratari*s are staged. The Werdi Budaya and the arts festival have had limited success in attracting the anticipated tourist audiences, but have proved to be enormously popular with the Balinese. Indeed, some *sendratari* performances are so well attended that police dogs have been used to keep overflow crowds from trying to press into the packed stage area.

*Sendratari* has evolved approaches to choreography that are markedly different from those of classical Balinese dance. The big-stage setting necessitates dance movement that is correspondingly large scale, with exaggerated gestures and wide steps. In the large performance space, the subtleties of traditional eye and hand movements are simply not noticeable to the audiences of several thousand. This is in marked contrast to the small scale of village or temple performance, whose audiences are limited to the immediate community, where dancers move on the same level as the audience, and where dance gesture creates an intimate atmosphere between performer and audience.

Another defining feature of *sendratari* is its condensed plot. Whereas traditional theater is characterized by similar sequences of standard interactions between stock characters with the unique aspects of the particular plot emerging slowly over many hours, *sendratari* typically offers a straightforward progression toward the intended climax and denouement.<sup>15</sup> The performers on stage are primarily dancers and actors who neither speak nor sing. The result is a form involving much more pantomime and melodrama than does the traditional theater.

In terms of performance setting, *sendratari* has little connection with the temple festivals and life-cycle ceremonies that contextualize

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15. Stock character types include the refined king (called *alus* or *manis*, "sweet") and his opposite, the coarse, tough (*keras*) type.

traditional theater. Held in a public arena in Bali's urbanized capital, being part of a *sendratari* audience involves buying tickets, arranging transportation, and participating in an impersonal and deritualized milieu. Performances begin and end early, and do not involve audiences in the "passage of the night" observances, lasting until early morning, that are demanded by temple ritual in order to keep the temple from becoming too quiet while its deities are in residence. Further, *sendratari* stories need not make implicit references to anyone's family, village, shrine, or ceremony.

Unlike traditional theater, where a cross-section of community residents can form an audience, *sendratari* audiences are mostly young, as are its performers. The genre is no doubt appreciated as entertainment for some of the same reasons that make break-dancing and rock music currently popular; it provides opportunities for the "youth culture" to explore its own identity. As such, and given its urban and secular setting, *sendratari* has become a form of "entertainment" which retains none of the links to ceremony or particularities of community identity characterizing *wayang parwa* or other traditional performances.

Not only are there strong contrasts between *sendratari* and traditional theater in form and setting, but also in their presentation and choice of linguistic material. Generally, STSI *sendratari*s have no *dalang* providing dialogue and narration. Rather, there is a group of a half dozen or so *dalangs*, male and female, who provide character voices and narrative bridges between scenes from offstage. The spoken and sung narration provided by these offstage voices utilizes both much more Balinese and less Kawi than is the case in either *wayang parwa* or *parwa* dance-drama. There is also less artful play with allusive language in sung poetic forms, such as the quotations from *kakawin* texts. Spoken narration in *sendratari* is a matter of getting across a story line by means of character dialogue, with less emphasis on poetic embellishment. Of major importance is the fact that the *dalangs* of *sendratari* provide dialogue working from a prepared script, with apparently little improvisation.

The cumulative effect of these features is rendered stronger by the overall linguistic structure of *sendratari*, the patterns of utterances that provide coherence to narration and dialogue. Since there are no clown-servants speaking Balinese, the noble characters now assume that function. This alteration of traditional usage is fundamental, for it affects the standard characterizations that have defined the portrayal of the Mahabharata in Balinese theater.

In *sendratari*, since the noble, divine, priestly, and demonic figures all now speak in Balinese, their speech takes on all the contours—

rhetorical, emotive, and interpersonal—of modern Balinese language. This is in marked contrast to their roles in shadow theater, where, as Kawi-speaking epic figures, they are always somewhat remote from that frame of reference. Moreover, they must also assume the referential role of the Balinese-speaking *panasar* who, in traditional theater, provide the interpretive screen through which the epic is made intelligible.

As a result of the shift in language usage, and also to fill the comic and commoner vacuum left by the absence of clown-servants, in *sendratari* a number of epic figures are characterized differently. Bima, the Pandawa hero who has always been unrefined and brashly heroic, becomes the comic of martial arts scenes. The elder Pandawa, Yudistira, seems to have lost his aloofness and emotional equilibrium, and is portrayed in guilty and tearful moods. The most obvious change in character is that of Sakuni, the elderly, Machiavellian counselor to the Korawas, who now appears as a buffoon in exaggerated emulation of a cowardly, feeble “bad guy.”

These changes, and particularly the current depiction of Sakuni as clownish, have not occurred without controversy. Many Balinese artists and intellectuals express reservations about what they see as a lack of depth and subtlety of characterization. Such hesitations are related to the growing apprehension that so-called “classical” theater forms are becoming less important. A paper by Wayan Dibia of STSI raises provocative issues on this subject.<sup>16</sup> Defining “classical” forms as those which have been intimately related to the Balinese palace environment, Dibia sets out the following characteristics of these genres:

- specific type of staging
- stock characters
- no use of dramatic script
- flexibility and elasticity
- particular role of humor
- dominance of dance and music over acting

Citing the numbers and types of theater troupes that have become inactive in recent years, Dibia goes on to comment on the impression that Balinese theater is becoming both shallower and more dependent on humor and slapstick, as well as less sacral and more commercial.

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16. The paper was presented as part of a lecture series under the auspices of the Baliology Project (Dibia 1985).

He relates these alterations to changed attitudes toward classical theater on the part of the Balinese, particularly the sense that theater performance is no longer integral to the spiritual life of the community. Dibia also notes that performers themselves seem less motivated to perfect their art through study of manuscripts and poetics.

Whatever the departures from tradition, Balinese audiences are seemingly delighted by the "new" Bima and Sakuni, and these characterizations are now being imitated more widely. Some Balinese sense in contemporary audiences a boredom with stock characters. At the same time, however, as the languages and contents of old epic texts become less familiar, the poetics and linguistic embellishments found in *parwa* dance-drama, for instance, are less entertaining. Audiences today seem to want both clear story lines and fresh character portrayal; they are less likely to be impressed by the subtleties of dance and instrumental music. People are no longer steeped in the same ethos of the Mahabharata that prevailed in the days when Balinese courts dominated the performing arts. In theater they seek not only epic stories but also glamour and a chance to identify with those aspects of modernity and city life now perceived to be desirable.

*Sendratari* responds to these needs, it could be argued, with spectacle, secularism, and relative simplicity of plot and language. Certainly it is clear that *sendratari* represents a marked departure from each of the characteristics Dibia lists as typical of classical theater. Its staging is very different; it shows signs of altering the stock-character framework; and it is performed using a written script. Its fixity of form makes *sendratari* a less flexible sort of performance. Broad use is made of humorous elements, and acting assumes the prominence once held by dance and music.

These changes mirror others affecting Balinese society as a whole, where communal agrarian life is making room for urbanized individualism. Traditional manuscripts, poetics, and literary languages are losing ground to printed books in the national language, and widespread television viewing has altered audience expectations of and relationship to dramatic performance. Institutionalized tourism has also affected the context and meaning of once-classical styles. Given these changes, there may be good reason to worry about the continued viability of Bali's rich classical theater heritage.

The question remains as to the extent to which the growth of *sendratari* reflects a fundamental and lasting change in Balinese theater and literary art. What does not seem likely is that the Mahabharata will cease to be communicated through the traditional arts. While it is undeniable that *parwa* is not the popular form it once was, and that

shadow theater performances often must compete with late-night television broadcasts, there may actually be more shadow theater performances today than during many periods in the past.<sup>17</sup> As showy and shallow as *sendratari* may sometimes appear, a 1986 STSI presentation of the *Mosalaparwa* was a powerful, complete narration of the events following the Great War between the Pandawas and Korawas, up through the death of Kresna.<sup>18</sup> A total of seven well-trained artists provided the offstage voices, and the rich variation of their vocal qualities heard through a powerful sound system provided intriguing effects.

Moreover, there has been a striking change within *sendratari* from a dance spectacle in which narrative voices were heard as a rising and falling counterpoint to the overall spectacle, and did not follow the dance movement, to an integration of movement and voice, where dialogue is cued to dance with increasing precision. This synchronization of character movement to speech makes the dancers appear more like puppets, and might well be the feature of *sendratari* that is most like the classical form of the shadow theater.

*Sendratari* might one day emerge as a new and colossal form of *wayang*, should the use of Kawi be encouraged along with the study of actual manuscript texts when stage dialogue is prepared. It would then inherit all of *wayang*'s verbal richness and its roots in ancient manuscripts and epic performance. It would not be the first time that controversial innovation in Balinese art took on the aura of continuity and tradition. If, on the other hand, the study of manuscripts and literary languages becomes an odd and anachronistic pastime, the speech, stories, characters, and settings of dramatic epic will doubtless lose their traditional significance, be it in the context of *sendratari* or another genre. Should that happen, these classical forms are likely to be even more deeply altered by the shifting awareness of a Balinese public whose expectations regarding written literature, oral perfor-

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17. This is a common and, indeed, perhaps accurate perception. The ebbing of traditional court dominance in the performing arts and the growing importance of both village organizations and government schools has created additional opportunities for performance not related to aristocratic ritual. There is a related perception that common-caste Balinese are also holding larger numbers of life-cycle ceremonies, or conducting them on a more elaborate scale. Economic growth, change in agricultural systems, and monetization may have, at least in the case of shadow theater, enlarged the community of potential commissioners of performance. More cash on hand tends to result in larger scale of ceremony, and more ceremony inevitably involves more performing arts.

18. The cassette recordings of commercially produced STSI *sendratari* productions sell very well in the shops of Denpasar and smaller towns.

mance, and dramatic norms must inevitably be conditioned by the prevailing patterns of communication in their time.

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## EPIC PURPOSE IN MALAY ORAL TRADITION AND THE EFFECTS OF LITERACY

Amin Sweeney

In my first essay in this volume, I argue that while delineating the Malay versions of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata as "the epics" is an unjustifiable Indocentric and ultimately Eurocentric projection, these works do share in common with many other *hikayat* what may be termed an "epic purpose" in the sense defined by Eric Havelock. What, then, of these tales in oral tradition? Do they reveal this purpose, and, if so, have writing and print literacy affected it? In the following, I shall concern myself more with the medium and genres of performance which produce tales concerning Rama than with "the tale" *per se*.<sup>1</sup> I do not include the Pandawa tales in my purview for the simple reason that they are no longer performed.<sup>2</sup>

There has been considerable speculation about the oral origin of the *Hikayat Seri Rama*. None of this, however, was based upon any knowledge of Malay oral tradition, and it has, therefore, happily created much confusion in the field. The morass in which the orthodox philologist obsessed with stemmatics may find himself<sup>3</sup> when he rigidly applies his methods to a work in the schematically composed Malay tradition is seen in the study of the *Hikayat Seri Rama* carried out by Alexander Ziesenis (1963). After comparing the W. G. Shel-

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1. A much expanded and more detailed version of this paper is found in Sweeney 1987.

2. The *wayang Jawa* form of Malay shadow play occasionally presented Pandawa tales. See Sweeney 1972.

3. English pronoun usage tends to produce an all-male universe. Malay and Indonesian do not have this gender distinction. So, for every "he," "him," and "himself," please read "or she," "or her," and "or herself." However—to use a cheap ploy of ingratiation—I may note that one is fairly safe in using "he" of orthodox philologists.



labear and Roorda van Eysinga versions, he becomes aware that the work will not yield to the tools of the philologist in search of an archetype. He notes a close relationship between the two versions but is stymied by the contradictions and other differences. He is forced to conclude that the two versions "can only have arisen by means of oral tradition" from "the same original source," and that "this original . . . version cannot . . . have possessed a clearly defined form" (Zieseniss 1963, 180). However, a comparison of the many passages in the two versions with almost identical wording reveals that these similarities are typical of a written style, and that the relationship can only have been chirographically controlled. The two versions are the product of schematically creative copying of an earlier version or versions, some of which is preserved in both versions. It is not necessary to resort to a primary oral tradition in order to find the causes of a lack of "clearly defined form." We see from Zieseniss's postulation to the effect that two manuscripts containing many identical passages could derive from an oral archetype that his understanding of "oral tradition" was extremely vague. As was natural for a scholar of his time—his work first appeared in 1928—Zieseniss could view oral composition only in terms of writing. For him, the oral archetype was a sort of unwritten writing. Yet in Malay oral tradition, the idea of a fixed text of such length is alien; where relatively fixed passages occur, they are highly stylized, possessing strongly emphasized mnemonic patterns.

One of the British accretions to the corpus of "classical" Malay literature was the so-called "folk version" of the Rama story (Maxwell 1886)—which, incidentally, was also included in Zieseniss's study. The British knew little about the form of the tale in oral tradition. At their behest, it was put into literary prose by Malay scribes who, in effect, produced a *hikayat*, which, it may be noted, found oblivion in print even more rapidly than the traditional literary version. Perhaps a tale in which Sita willingly elopes with Ravana did not seem overly promising to the seeker of epic. However, the genre of stylized professional storytelling which produced this tale still lingers on today, though I have met but one teller (Isahak bin Daud of Perlis) who was familiar with a Rama tale. It may be mentioned that this teller did not attach any greater importance to the tale concerning Rama than to others in his repertoire. While it may be argued that the performances of such tellers today are but the residue left after the erosion of their domain by writing and later print, if we are to assess the effects of literacy upon that domain, it will surely be necessary to gain some idea of the teller's situation in the period before this displacement. In considering this

problem, I believe the most fruitful approach to be a study of the vehicle used to present these tales, even though, in the Malay context, this will necessarily widen our focus to include tales other than that of Rama.

In this essay, therefore, I propose to consider what effects the displacement of the oral specialist by writing may have had upon his language and presentation within the dwindling oral enclave of contrived speech. For example, was his language more mnemonically bound in the past when he played a central role in the efficient functioning of society, for, it might be argued, his stock of cultural information would have had to be preserved in a much more detailed fashion than in later times when he had become a mere entertainer? The question we are asking is, in fact, two-sided: were those areas of the oral enclave whose functions were displaced by writing more rigidly patterned on the level of word choice than those which survived; and, in those areas which survived, has the degree of mnemonic and rhythmical patterning been affected by writing, and later by print and the electronic media, *even though both performer and his audience might themselves remain entirely illiterate?*

Neither the written sources nor the oral specialist himself will be able to throw much light on these matters. The fact that traditional Malay literature was schematically composed for a listening audience makes it very difficult to detect the presence in literature of stylized oral language transposed directly into writing, especially as adjustments are likely to have been made to suit the written dialect. European sources are equally unenlightening; until quite recently there was no awareness even of the existence of an oral enclave of contrived speech, and the only examples of stylized oral form recorded in these sources were a few passages produced by formulaic clustering such as the runs of the storyteller and incantations collected from the folk practitioner. The storyteller is, of course, unable to throw much light upon the nature of his role or the shape of his performance in the distant past; oral tradition is not some sort of unwritten writing which preserves the words of the past somehow independently of the teller and his audience, and the performance bears witness only to the time and place of utterance.

However, one possible line of enquiry opens up when we realize that the displacement of the oral enclave by writing did not proceed at a uniform rate. I am certainly not advocating a cultural evolutionist approach; rather I take it as self-evident that an examination of the displacement of the oral tradition in the Malay-speaking areas should not confine itself to merely one of those areas, such as the Straits of

Malacca. All too often, definitions which insist that the Malays are a coastal or riverine people ignore the fact that they are also a mountain people. Thus, for example, it is undeniable that much of what survives in the stylized oral tradition of the coastal areas is not merely shared in common with, but is indeed derived from, the Minangkabau tradition. This, plus the fact that until relatively modern times little of the oral enclave of contrived speech had been displaced by writing, and that almost all areas of knowledge were still stored, retrieved, and communicated orally on all levels of society should surely have made the study of Minang oral tradition a prerequisite for the study of Malay discourse in general, and Malay literature and oral composition in particular. It is true that, in the past, attention had been drawn to certain aspects of the relationships between Minang and coastal Malay oral traditions, but no attempt was made to integrate these observations and fully realize the implications of what was being said. R. O. Winstedt ([1907] 1923, 37-38) was undoubtedly correct in his view that the bulk of the *penglipur lara* (soother of cares) tales collected in Malaya under the auspices of the British "came into the Peninsula by way of Menangkabau." Indeed, in discussing the "metrical passages" of these tales, he drew attention to close similarities of meter and language with passages of the Minang *kaba Cindua Mato* and with the "sayings in which is embodied . . . the constitution" of Negeri Sembilan, whose inhabitants are descended from Minangkabau immigrants and speak a Minang dialect. Yet Winstedt understood these metrical passages to be merely poetic islands in a sea of prose (Sweeney 1973, 27). He was unaware that the *penglipur lara* delivered his whole tale in these short stretches of utterance, and that the passages differed from the body of the text only in that they were relatively more fixed in form, being "runs" of clustered formulas. Thus, while Winstedt made an educated speculation, based on "the analogy of other ancient literatures" and the "rude ballad" form of the published *Cindua Mato*, that this "rugged metrical form" was "the vehicle of all Malay rhapsodist literature," he wrongly believed that the form survived only in "stock purple patches" of the *penglipur lara*. And again, while he perceived the similarities with the incantations of medicine men and *adat* sayings, he felt that the latter survived only in "a few legal sayings" (Winstedt [1907] 1923, 8).

Clearly, scholars of Malay literature sorely needed more information on the Malay oral and literary traditions of Sumatra. In 1940, P. Voorhoeve, one of the few Dutch scholars of Malay possessing extensive first-hand knowledge of several languages and literatures of Sumatra, provided scholarly support for Winstedt's speculation referred to above. He observes that throughout the south Sumatran area, tales

such as the Middle-Malay *andai-andai* and the Lampung *tetimbai* (also in Malay, but with a strong admixture of Javanese words) reveal a strong measure of uniformity of language and style. He further notes that:

the form is broadly the same as that of the Minangkabau *kaba*: rhymeless lines of mainly nine to ten syllables, with a strong rhythm and frequent use of parallelism. . . . I am inclined to accept that this is the real Malay story form, and that the prose of the classical Malay literature, with its endless *maka*, *sekali peristiwa* . . . etc., is a product of the schoolish translators from Persian and Indian languages. Or better, that it was they who elevated this natural awkwardness . . . to the level of literature, with an easy-going neglect of that form deeply rooted in Malay language consciousness, the *kaba* form, which is closely connected with *sja'ir* and *pantun* (1940, 133).

Voorhoeve observes further that, "Over practically the whole of Sumatra there exists [a] distinction between the simple folktale and a more literary form" (1940, 133). With the exception of a few examples existing in traditional manuscript form, this "more literary form" mainly consisted of orally transmitted materials. I was at first surprised that Voorhoeve had seen fit to include both oral and written versions in the category we would now term "oral stylized form," which in my experience differed considerably from Malay literary (i.e., written) style. Yet he was clearly following local custom, and, from his descriptions (1940, 1978), there did not appear to be a noteworthy difference of form or style between stylized oral and written materials. While his focus was mainly upon south Sumatra, we note that in Minangkabau there is a similar lack of differentiation between oral and written materials in much of the traditional narrative. Thus, traditional (i.e., manuscript) literary versions of the *kaba* (long narrative poem) differ little in form from the oral versions, and both are included in the genre *kaba*. Ph. S. van Ronkel, for example, remarks that the *kaba* manuscripts are "mainly in poetic form, overflowing with peculiar expressions" (1909, 474).

It would seem from the evidence of south and west Sumatran writings that the literary style is much closer to oral composition and represents a stage of literary development closer to oral performance than that found in "classical" Malay literature. I do not accept Voorhoeve's negative assessment of that "classical" Malay style, which I

consider to be the inevitable result of the development of a written dialect in the hands of an elite anxious to emphasize the exclusive nature of its craft. However, one cannot but concur with Voorhoeve that the "rhymeless line" of the Sumatran tales is a basic Malay story form. Indeed, these short parallelistic stretches of utterance are the basic units not merely of narrative, but also of the *kata adat* (traditional sayings), incantations, and indeed of the *pantun*, and ultimately, after literary refinement, of the *syair* form. Whereas scholars in the past have seen this "rhythmical verse" as "the Malay's first essay in poetry" (Winstedt 1958, 145), it should be noted that the motive was not "poetic" in the modern sense. This method of processing speech was a highly pragmatic way of storing knowledge orally.

Even in certain extant texts of palace Malay, there are indications of the influence of these units of speech, examples being the *Hikayat Raja-raja Pasai* and the *Silsilah Kutai*, in both of which we encounter instances of the short, mnemonically patterned stretches of utterance so typical of oral style. It is likely that these tales were originally told in their entirety in these short stretches. With writing, however, the original rhythm would begin to break down, the only parts able to preserve their form somewhat longer being relatively fixed runs. Indeed, W. Kern (1956, 18-21) provides examples from the *Silsilah Kutai* of the breaking down of the "meter" and its transformation into a *hikayat* style. For Kern, this was "corruption" and "retrogression." Yet clearly, here we are observing an entirely expected feature: the transition from an oral to a written style, where the original degree of mnemonic patterning was no longer functional.

When we examine the written versions of the *kaba*, we see little evidence of this transition. This is not to say that the Minangs did not possess a more "developed" written style—there are a number of Muslim *hikayat* written in a variety of "classical" Malay. My point is that matters of the most central concern to Minang society as a whole continued to be preserved, retrieved, and communicated orally in spite of the presence of writing. And the written form of the *kaba* is strong evidence of the oral orientation of the society: writing did not succeed in displacing the *kaba* or replacing it with some foreign-derived literary form; neither did it gradually transform it into something else. The form of the written *kaba* reveals that the scribes were not merely concerned with recording the content of the tale, which could then be "elevated" to new heights of literary splendor; on the contrary, they preserved also the traditional oral style, an indication that this style was sufficiently meaningful and prestigious to be preserved in writing.

Unlike the fate of the oral *cerita*, which became *hikayat* in “classical” Malay, the oral genre *kaba* remained a *kaba* even when written.

The strongly oral orientation of traditional Minang society is only fully realized when we allow ourselves to look at Minang discourse as a whole. It is my belief that, in the past, Western scholars have been hindered from doing this by their natural tendency to view Minang discourse in terms of their own categorization of knowledge, so that Minang tradition came to be carved up and studied in terms of “the law,” “literature,” and “history,” without sufficient consideration of the Minang’s own principles of classification. The scholar of literature, for example, tended to see *adat* (usually translated “customary law” or “custom”) as somehow not literature, and left its study to the jurists. R. J. Wilkinson, assuming that the Minangs made the same distinctions as he does between “the law” and “history,” and that *adat* is to be equated with some Platonic form of “the law,” finds it necessary to rationalize the presence of “history” in *adat* (1922, 14). Similarly, G. D. Willinck (1909, 50–55), while noting that law is transmitted among the Minang in “aphoristic sayings,” felt that “the aphorisms in question . . . were, however, always more allusions to the existing law and could not be considered as laws proper.” In fact, as we are now aware, such *kata adat* or *pepatah/petua* were not illustrations of a point; they were the point. And when Willinck seeks legal knowledge in Minang tales, he concludes that while “under all that worthless material there lies buried here and there a vague allusion to one or another rule of positive law,” these tales have “at best . . . some worth for the literary scholar.”

Thus, the temptation to see the *kaba* merely as “literary art” will tend to obscure the fact that it functions as the purveyor of what in a print culture would be differentiated into many branches of knowledge, each of which would merit a distinct genre. Had Willinck understood the tendency of oral tradition to preserve knowledge in narrative form, he would have realized that much of the “legal” knowledge he was seeking was preserved in the *kaba*. The observations of Taufik Abdullah (1970) are particularly illuminating in this respect: a *kaba* deals with “the ideal conduct of life in accordance with *adat*.” The *Kaba Cindua Mato* “is a standard reference work for Minangkabau *adat* theoreticians and guardians,” and “a considerable number of *adat* sayings” are based on it. It “relates the tradition of Minangkabau royalty,” and provides “the ideal model for the Minangkabau monarchy,” demonstrating “the ideal political and social structure of Minangkabau in operation.” Taufik also draws attention to “the people’s belief in the characters as historical figures,” the descriptions of

the "geography of the Minangkabau World and its neighbors," and of "community settlement patterns" (1970, 3-4, 13). These observations will surely bring to mind Havelock's remarks on the social encyclopedia of oral tradition. From N. G. Phillips's (1981) study of *kaba* performances, it appears that the *kaba* as an oral form was then still a central concern of the Minang community and formed a basic part of the education of the young.

In spite of the strong oral orientation of traditional communication in Minang society, expressed in the various verbal manifestations of *adat* such as *pepatah*, *kaba*, *tambo*, *pidato*, and so forth, it should not be forgotten that this is also an age of mass education in Indonesia. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, Willinck (1909, 44ff.) found that the Minang people considered the *adat* age (*masa adat*) to be past. It is clear that a study of the interaction between oral and written Minang traditions cannot afford to rely only upon discourse in the Minang dialect, or to treat the Dutch presence merely as an alien intrusion which can safely be ignored. While both oral and written Minang composition reveals a strong oral orientation, in the context of discourse in Minang society as a whole, large areas of oral tradition have been displaced by Dutch, and later Indonesian, print culture. Thus, for example, by Willinck's time, large areas of *adat* had been eroded by Dutch criminal law, and this also led to the appearance of many *undang-undang* (legal digests) writings in the Minang dialect.

It appears from Willinck's account that during the *masa adat*, those areas of discourse perceived by Willinck to concern "the law" were still firmly within the oral enclave of contrived speech. Yet while the oral specialist was the chief exponent and custodian of the *kata adat*, he did not by any means possess sole proprietary rights to them. While stylized oral *narrative* constituted a body of general education, particular skills were needed to produce it, and its composition, therefore, tended to be the exclusive domain of the specialist. The layman would, of course, be familiar with the patterns and themes of such narrative, but his role was that of recipient rather than producer. The wisdom of oral society was consequently also encapsulated in *adat* sayings. This area of the oral enclave of contrived speech with its short, relatively fixed, self-contained units was so designed that it could easily be drawn upon by the vernacular for use in dialogue. Equating *adat* with "the law" merely because European law displaced part of the *adat* produces an extremely limited, indeed distorted, perception of the scope of *adat*. The *kata adat* were, in fact, the repository of all knowledge that depended upon a specific word choice for its validity and force.

The *adat* saying provides clear evidence that oral culture is capable of preserving a large volume of knowledge in relatively fixed form. The principle of organization, however, is very different from that of a printed text, which has a beginning, an ending, and a fixed sequence. In the case of nonnarrative print materials, this sequence may be determined by some abstract principle of classification or by alphabetical indexing. The corpus of *adat* sayings in oral tradition could have no such fixed sequence. Like language, it has no beginning or ending; the "index" is the human situation. The sequence in which the sayings are presented will be in response to the needs of the immediate situation or, more accurately, to the schemata which determine the perception of a "situation." Within the scope of this response, a number of sayings may cluster to form a passage of relatively fixed sequence, although considerable variation is still possible in that sequence.

A comparison of the *kata adat* with oral narrative as presented in the *kaba* reveals that only in the runs of the narrative is there a comparable degree of fixity on the level of word choice; indeed, many of the utterances occurring in runs are, in fact, *kata adat*. The language of the main body of the narrative varies from performance to performance (Phillips 1981). It would, therefore, be unwise to assume on the basis of studies of the discourse of ancient cultures preserved in writing that in an oral culture, (a) narrative is the only way to preserve the significant, or that (b) it is in narrative that the maximum possibilities of verbatim memorization in an oral culture are necessarily realized.<sup>4</sup> In a culture such as that of ancient Greece, which developed from an oral to a written style without the benefit of foreign models obtained from a culture in which the problems faced by a primary oral culture were already solved, the obvious material for transcription would be narrative, for the principle of organization had long been established in oral tradition, narrative being one of the most basic ways in which humans organized experience. It would not, however, have been possible to produce a collection of sayings and aphorisms at such a stage of development, for no framework or system of indexing existed in oral tradition which might have been adapted by writing to classify such material. The aphorism was, of course, used in oral narrative. However, the structuring of narrative was based upon human experience, and the only model available for employing the aphorism in that narrative was that provided by the human situation. It was thus in this context that aphorisms were first recorded in writing. It may be

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4. Of course, most *kata adat* are themselves narrative units, but they do not form part of a larger *narrative* structure.



speculated, however, that their occurrence in the written versions of ancient Greek oral epic is merely the tip of an aphoristic iceberg.

This is certainly the case in Minang society. The fact that many areas of Minang discourse still reveal a strong oral orientation, even though the *masa adat* is long gone, enables us to appreciate the vast amount of mnemonically fixed knowledge preserved in the *kata adat*. A perusal of the *kaba*, be it in oral form or enshrined in writing, gives little indication of the extent of this mnemonically preserved knowledge. It is only the availability of foreign methods of classification, originating from print-based culture, which has allowed the production of collections of *kata adat*, and, ironically, it is the potentialities of print which sound the death knell of *kata adat*. Without these collections, and without access to the living tradition, one would tend to reach conclusions similar to those of Eric Havelock (1963, 93) concerning ancient Greece that "epic" was the only way of preserving the significant.

However, the relative lack of verbatim memorization in the *kaba* should not be seen as an indication that narrative is any the less an efficient preserver of knowledge than the *kata adat*. On the contrary, such fixed language was unnecessary in stylized narrative. The *kata adat*, which consisted of independent units or self-contained clusters of units, depended not merely for their force, but also for their continued existence on a fairly fixed choice of words, for the unit or cluster did not form part of a larger formal, that is, verbalized, structure. In the case of narrative, however, the stretches of utterance are organized on several schematic levels (e.g., plot, character typing, themes, etc.) into a coherent whole. Thus, on the level of word choice, the formulaic or substituting mode of composition produces an adequate degree of stability to ensure the preservation of what is significant, although when a relatively fixed passage is needed to achieve a certain effect, that is, when a specific choice of words in a certain order has to be preserved, this may indeed be realized, as in runs.

We need not speculate on whether the form of the *kaba* was even more stable during the *masa adat*. The orally produced *kaba* is still a central concern of Minang society and is regarded as an important vehicle for communicating knowledge. It is sufficient for our purposes to know that the form in which the *kaba* is produced today provides enough stability to enable it to perform the function of preserving and disseminating the significant. If it were now possible to compare this form with that of the composition of storytellers who have been displaced to the peripheries of society, we might well gain some insight into that process of displacement and its effects on the stability of a tale. Of course, if such a comparison were to have any validity at all,

the genres compared would have to be closely related. A comparison with an entirely different genre such as the *wayang kulit* would be, as we shall see, of but minimal value. Such a related form would seem to be the *penglipur lara* tales of tellers such as Mir Hasan (who produced the "folk version" of the Rama tale referred to above) and Pawang Ana, which, as noted above, are generally accepted by scholars to be of Minangkabau origin. While the stylized form of these tales was not recorded, one may still find tales of this type performed in Pahang. Evidence for the view that these tales—or better, the mode of composing them—are of Minangkabau origin is provided by (a) the tellers themselves. For example, Esah bte. Mat Akil, who performed *Raja Donan*, stated that she learned the tale from her Minangkabau grandfather; (b) formulas which carry with them the assumption that the Minang universe is the basis for all comparisons. For example, in Jidin's renderings of *Bongsu Pinang Peribut* and *Raja Muda*, it is said of a princess that, in the whole of Minangkabau and Sumatra, there was none to compare with her;<sup>5</sup> and, most important, (c) the structuring of the stretches of utterance. One of the best examples to demonstrate this is Esah's rendering of *Raja Donan*, for the form is still close enough to that of the *kaba* to make a comparison worthwhile. An examination of the most typical stretches of utterance in Esah's performances reveals their identity of structure with the *kaba* form. By "typical stretches," I mean those units of speech which, whether used separately or clustered in runs, are relatively fixed in wording and are the basic formulas of composition. These units are of almost uniform length, containing mainly nine syllables. For example:

*Cindai jantan melilit pinggang; keris cabut di dalam sarung.*

(Silk sash enfolds the waist; *keris* is unsheathed from from scabbard.)

They are also categorized by the abundant use of parallelism, and each stretch of utterance corresponds to one phrase of the melody. These units are thus identical in form to those of the *kaba* and, indeed, to those of the south Sumatran tales examined by P. Voorhoeve (1940, 1971) and William Collins (1979).

When, however, we examine those parts of the tales which are not fixed in wording, that is, the main body of the narrative, we see that

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5. *Selilit Pulau Perca, sealam Tanah Minangkabau, ta'ada tolok bandingnya.*

the structuring of Pahang tales such as that performed by Esah is much looser on the level of word choice than that of the *kaba* form. This fact may be demonstrated by the use of three criteria: length of utterance; use of parallelism; and reliance upon formulaic substitution. In the *kaba*, the stretches of utterance of the whole performance are of almost uniform length (i.e., nine syllables), whereas those of the Pahang performance are regular only in the runs; in the body of the narrative, the "lines" are much more irregular in length.

There is a much higher incidence of the use of parallelism in the *kaba* than in the Pahang performance. In the widest sense, two or more stretches of utterance are parallelistic when they are felt to be balanced against one another rhythmically, even though they are only approximately similar in length. By such a criterion, all the "lines" of both *kaba* and *penglipur lara* tales are in parallelisms. Here, however, I am using "parallelism" in a narrower sense. For two or more such stretches of utterance to be considered a parallelism, they must, in addition to having rhythmical balance, also possess a similar grammatical structure involving some degree of word repetition—be it only a repeated preposition, postposition, affix, or particle—in corresponding parts of the stretches of utterance. While parallelism is confined to consecutive lines and is, in fact, used in only a minority of lines, the principle generating it (by my definition above) is exactly the same as that underlying the production of formulaic substitutions of the "Parry-Lordian" type, whereby formulaic lines and half lines are those which "follow the basic patterns of rhythm and syntax and have at least one word in the same position in the line in common with other lines or half lines" (Lord [1960] 1976, 47). It is these productive patterns which clearly form the basis of *kaba* composition. As Phillips notes, they "constitute the grammar of the special, limited language of Sijobang" (1981, 110). Thus, while variety of expression is encouraged in *kaba* composition (Phillips 1981, 116), the structures or patterns which generate the language of the *kaba* form are relatively fixed and limited in number. This feature, combined with the uniformity in length of the stretches of utterance, gives to the *kaba* a stability on the level of language which is clearly lacking in the Pahang performance. While the runs of the latter still reveal in relatively crystallized form the results of formulaic substitution within a symmetrical framework, in the body of the performance, formulaic patterns, while still present, are much less precisely used and do not keep the stretches of utterance within the confines of a regular length. Indeed, not infrequently, the length and form of an utterance may approach that of nonstylized,

everyday speech, from which it is distinguished only by its sung presentation. An example of this may be seen in the second line of:

*Dipasang dian tanglung pelita,  
Bangkit nga lah Raja Diu pergi ke kolam bersiram  
dua suami isteri.*

(Candles, lanterns and lamps were lighted.

Raja Diu arose, went to the bath tank, and bathed together with his wife.) (Sweeney 1973, 34).

The relatively much lower degree of mnemonic patterning in the performance of Pahang tellers such as Esah than in *kaba* composition is a further indication that the *kaba* remains a much more efficient vehicle for the preservation of significant and important knowledge on the level of word choice. I believe that this may be directly related to the relative degree of importance accorded to these modes of stylized composition in their respective societies. In Minangkabau, as we have seen above, the orally produced *kaba* is still central to the concerns of society as a whole, for it constitutes a body of general education, and, indeed, embodies the general state of mind. Obviously, society will endeavor to ensure that such knowledge is preserved in as stable a form as possible. It is not enough, however, to explain this stability merely in terms of some ill-defined notion of public awareness of importance; we must rather attempt to appreciate the mechanics involved. In saying that the *kaba* embodies the general state of mind, we are implying that the thought processes which produce the *kaba* form are not restricted to use in the *kaba*. In more specific terms, we may say that the methods of presenting and preserving the knowledge contained therein are reinforced on other levels of communication: the short stretch of mnemonically patterned utterance used in the *kaba* is also the basic unit of the *kata adat*, *pidato*, *tambo*, and so on.

This presents a striking contrast with the situation of the Pahang teller, who is an almost forgotten figure in Pahang society; even in his own rural milieu his tales are no longer a central concern, and performances are few and far between. The thought processes revealed in his composition no longer embody the general state of mind, for the methods he employs receive little reinforcement from other modes of stylized oral communication, most of which have already long been displaced by writing. Indeed, he may not even have heard another teller's performance in decades. There is thus no longer an effective system of checks and balances on the production of stylized stretches of

utterance, and this tends to undermine gradually the stability of these units of composition.

Further evidence of how the weakening of the system of checks and balances results in the undermining of the stability of a tale, and of the stylized oral form in general, is provided by the Malay shadow play. In a previous study of the genre (1972), I observed that the stability of the Rama repertoire of the *wayang Siam* seemed to vary in direct proportion to the degree of popularity it enjoyed and I illustrated this by comparing the situation in Kelantan with that in Perak, Kedah, Trengganu, and Patani. In Kelantan, in contrast with other areas, certain factors seemed to exercise some control over the content of the basic repertoire: a large number of *dalangs* knew, and at times performed, the story, and a large part of at least the older section of the populace was well acquainted with it. A *dalang* who made radical changes in a well-known episode not compatible with existing levels of expectation laid himself open to criticism from the audience. Further, although a *dalang* might receive an idiosyncratic version from his teacher, he was unlikely to restrict his accumulation of repertoire to the one source and was able to refresh his version from other sources. Where there are few *dalangs* who know the story and where it is now little known in the society, the perpetuation of idiosyncrasy is far more likely (Sweeney 1972, 261).

When these findings are considered in the context of Walter Anderson's (1923, 397ff.) so-called "law of self-correction," it becomes clear that the effectiveness—indeed validity—of this "law" varies in direct proportion to the frequency of performance of a tale. By now, it is perhaps superfluous to reiterate that in oral tradition knowledge is preserved only by constant repetition. The less frequently a tale is performed, the less stable it becomes, and the more likely it is that large parts of the knowledge preserved therein will be forgotten.

It should be emphasized at this point that I am not equating popularity or frequency of performance of the Rama tale with that of the genre, nor attempting to explain the waning importance attached to the *tale* as a symptom or result of a gradual decline of the *genre*. On the contrary, in Patani, the *wayang* still enjoys considerable popularity, even though the basic Rama tale is less frequently performed and less stable in form than in Kelantan.

However, while these remarks may throw some light upon the mechanics of the weakening of the system of checks and balances as manifested in the dwindling sources of reinforcement and correction, they do not explain why the basic Rama tale has become increasingly less important in the estimation of both performers and audiences of the

*wayang*. It might perhaps be argued that my study of the *wayang* (1972), being largely a synchronic one, is not capable of detecting change. I would reply, however, that (a) my study indicates that the Rama tale in Patani, Kedah, Trengganu, and Perak was once much more frequently performed; (b) comparative work concerning differences between the generations reveals that even in Kelantan the basic repertoire of younger *dalangs* is far less complete than that of older *dalangs*; (c) older *dalangs*' knowledge of the tale in Patani matches in length and complexity only that of younger *dalangs* in Kelantan; and (d) although I speculated in 1970 (Sweeney 1972, 77) that younger *dalangs* might fill out their knowledge of the tale in the course of their careers, I have not found that this has occurred in the intervening years. I believe, therefore, that I am justified in speaking of a general decline in the knowledge of the basic Rama tale in the Malay shadow play. I would argue that the adverse fortunes of the Rama tale are to be explained in terms of the changing role of the *wayang* from being a purveyor of knowledge and preserver of the significant (which, of course, had to be entertaining to be effective) to becoming merely a vehicle of entertainment. In more general terms, these changes provide us with an example of the erosion of certain functions of the oral enclave of contrived speech.

I am aware that the *wayang* is no longer a central concern of Kelantanese society as a whole. Indeed, in a broader context, when measured against the importance of writing, print, film, and radio, the oral enclave of preserved speech was already in 1962 (when I began my study of oral composition), clearly peripheral as a preserver of knowledge. Yet in certain areas of the rural milieu in which the *dalang* operated, considerable importance was still attached to the knowledge he purveyed. In Kelantan, for the older *dalang* at least, the Rama tale represented a vehicle of general education, a purveyor of knowledge, a record of history, and a source of power. This was revealed not merely in what the *dalang* said in conversation, but in the nature of his postulated audience. And one may be sure that the creation of that postulated audience was determined by the *dalang*'s knowledge of the attitudes and expectations of the flesh-and-blood audience who attended his performances. This is not to deny that the denizens of the invisible world such as the *jembalang* (spirits of the puppets) played an important role in the *dalang*'s postulated audience, as is revealed in the use of various *bilang* (runs) which were often identical in form to invocations and were perceived to possess a certain ritual value, or in the various ritual practices performed within and without the drama. However, this part of the postulated audience, too, is determined to a large extent by the current beliefs of the audience of flesh and blood.

When a society no longer attaches importance to such beliefs, the invisible audience becomes much less prominent in the *dalang's* estimation, especially as his appeal to such beings loses its calculated rhetorical effect upon his actual audience. The changing function of the *wayang*, from being a purveyor and preserver of knowledge and a source of power to becoming a vehicle of mere entertainment, is thus again reflected in the erosion of the ritual importance of the *wayang*, for it is clear that the decline in knowledge of the Rama tale has been accompanied by a corresponding decline of ritual knowledge and practices.

It is perhaps noticeable that in relating my comments concerning the *kaba* and Pahang performances to my findings on the *wayang*, I did not attempt a comparison on the same level of composition. In my consideration of the *kaba* form, I was particularly concerned with stability on the level of specific word choice, whereas my discussion of the Rama tale and the *wayang* was more general in its purview, although certainly concerned with the level of plot. My justification of this method of operating is two-fold: on the one hand, it is my contention that the principles underlying the system of checks and balances which control the stability of a performance are not merely applicable to only one level of schematic composition; on the other hand, a simple comparison of the degree of fixity on the level of word choice between the Pahang tales and the *wayang* that failed to take into account other levels of composition would produce extremely misleading results. I have argued that in an oral tradition important knowledge is processed for survival, to the extent that the degree of stability of stylized oral material may be an indicator of the importance accorded to it by society. A comparison of the language used in the *wayang* with that of the Pahang tales might seem to indicate the presence in the latter of a higher degree of mnemonic patterning than in the *wayang*. Certainly, stretches of utterance are more regular in length; indeed, it would seem that the *wayang* speech was never divided into short, regular units delineated by the patterns of melody or chant. And yet I would argue that, whether as purveyor and preserver of knowledge, or even merely as a vehicle of pure entertainment, the *wayang* is accorded much more importance, is held in much higher esteem, and is far more popular in its own milieu than is the case with the performance of the Pahang teller in his milieu. The apparent contradiction is only resolved when we examine other schematic levels of composition. Then we see that the relative lack of mnemonic rigidity on the level of word choice in the *wayang* is amply compensated for by the very high degree of stability on the level of character typing: here the performer is no longer reliant

merely upon verbal memory; character is encapsulated in the iconography of the puppets, the various traits which constitute a type being encoded in the appearance of each puppet.

Whether or not *wayang* speech was once relatively more fixed in form is impossible to demonstrate. It is demonstrable, however, that where there was a perceived need to preserve a specific word choice, this was readily accomplished, as is clear from the form of the *bilangan* (runs) and invocations of the older *dalangs* I studied. Here, the use of parallelism and other mnemonic devices enabled the *dalang* to preserve long passages in relatively fixed form. Here, too, however, I have observed a general decline in the use of these fixed passages over the past three decades, and this accords with my comments above concerning the depreciation of the ritual aspects of the *wayang*.

While the recent history of the Malay *wayang* provides us with a good example of how the oral enclave of contrived speech is eroded and its function displaced, this process is not necessarily to be taken as a sign that the genre itself is being displaced at the same rate. On the one hand, it is true, the spread of mass education, the stream of information provided by the modern media, and the ease with which information may be preserved by those media have led to an awareness that much of the knowledge preserved in the *wayang* is no longer suited to the modern age, and that the oral methods of preserving that knowledge are obsolete and inefficient by modern (i.e., print culture) standards. A good illustration of this growing awareness was provided by reactions to the news in 1969 that the Americans had landed on the moon. Awang Lah (died 1974), the greatest *dalang* of his time, for whom the *wayang* was the source of all important knowledge and power, proclaimed that the news could not be true, for "in the *wayang* it says that there are seven layers of sky. They could not have got through those." Two of Awang Lah's pupils, discussing his views afterwards, felt that what he had said "might have been true once, but now times have changed."

On the other hand, the genre survives. It is clear that for the younger generation of *dalangs*, the *wayang* is increasingly a vehicle for entertainment rather than a source of general education. In this context of the *wayang* as an entertainment business, we are reminded of Walter Ong's (1977, 82ff.) comments regarding the ways in which a new medium apparently reinforces the old initially but eventually changes or even destroys it. It is indisputable that the new media of communication, including print, film, tape recorders, and now television and video, have had a very significant effect upon the presentation of the *wayang*; indeed, many of the devices used by these media have been



consciously appropriated by the *dalang*. For example, the insistence of the Kelantan state government on a three-hour limit for performances, based, of course, upon what is considered a reasonable length for a performance by Western media standards, has forced the *dalang* to present his wares in a much more concise format than was formerly the case. Again, his model for accomplishing this is the format of the film and television drama. This is, in fact, now expected by his audience, who have become familiar with the instant entertainment provided by the electronic media. Even the methods of organizing a performance are now based upon what obtains in the cinema: whereas the *wayang* was once performed mainly for rites of passage, the vast majority of performances today are organized as a business enterprise involving the sale of tickets. The modern *dalang* does not operate by half measures: standard equipment nowadays includes a loud speaker, amplifier, and throat microphone, which enable him to assume a much more intimate ethos than formerly, the model again being the electronic media. Some *dalangs* make extensive use of the tape recorder to provide music, usually from the sound track of Hindustani films, before the performance commences, or even to record the performances of other *dalangs* who are thought to have something worth appropriating. There are even *dalangs* who feel that colored footlights add just the right touch!

The new media, moreover, play a significant role in the development of repertoire. Many *dalangs*, especially in Patani, adapt the plots of Hindustani films to the *wayang*. Increasingly, *dalangs* make use of material they have read in published sources. Literacy also enables *dalangs* to make summaries of their repertoire in writing. For example, many of the tales of Hamzah, the star pupil of Awang Lah and a leading *dalang* today, are recorded in a notebook in summary form. There is even a tendency for the new generation of *dalangs* to note down in writing other materials, such as *bilang* and invocations, although, as mentioned above, much less attention is devoted to these than was once the case. Here, we see how the *dalang* is attempting to ensure the survival of his livelihood, the *wayang*, even though this entails undermining the orality of his craft.

In conclusion, I would suggest that in the Malay context, while we may make comparisons between written and oral versions, as in my study of the Ramayana and the Malay shadow play (1972), such a comparison will tell us little about the interaction between oral and literary versions unless it is preceded by a study of the relationships

between orality and literacy in Malay discourse as a whole.<sup>6</sup> While there is internal and external evidence to show that *dalangs* in the past had occasional access to manuscripts of the *Hikayat Seri Rama* via a literate intermediary, today the demise of the *hikayat* ensures that there is no interaction between the oral performances and the written texts.<sup>7</sup> While a few *dalangs* are literate enough to make summaries of their tales, the advantages of literacy are private to themselves: the performance must meet the expectations of an oral mental set, for the great majority of regular *wayang* patrons have but a low level of literacy. When an individual from a *wayang* area attains a high level of literacy, he tends not to watch the *wayang*, even though he may profess that he still loves the “old” entertainments. This need not be an effect of literacy *per se*, but result rather from a wish to dissociate himself from his rural, peasant background and identify with the urban middle class. However, if such a person reaches university level, he may be reintroduced to both the *hikayat* and the *wayang* in a scholarly context. The scholar, in fact, often has much more effect on developments in oral tradition than he may realize. He has, for example, been responsible for the appearance of an increasingly common figure: “the informant,” who often learns as much or more from the scholar as *vice versa* and channels it back into the oral tradition.

In speaking of the effects of mass literacy on performances in Malay, we are concerned not so much with its direct influence upon the performer and his audience—who may be but semiliterate or illiterate—as with the role of writing and later print in displacing large areas of oral tradition, transforming the function of what survived, and easing the oral specialist away from the centers of power, a process which, moreover, has had no small effect upon the form and presentation of his offerings. With regard to the influence of the modern media upon the performer and his audience, it is clear that the electronic media have had a more direct effect upon the shape of performances than has mass literacy.

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6. And this was, of course, lacking in my book of 1972. The examples of Raymond Firth and Rambo would seem to indicate the need for a sequel: the Malay *wayang* twenty-five years later. There have certainly been many changes in the *wayang*, which in 1990 is performed but infrequently (see my “Wayang Kulit dan Cabarannya Masa Kini” [in press]). However, such a study might well reveal more about change in the writer than in the *wayang*.

7. Except, of course, when the bureaucrat gets in on the act.

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